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*THE CRAFT OF  
AMERICAN HISTORY*

Volume I

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*THE CRAFT OF  
AMERICAN HISTORY*

*Selected Essays*

EDITED BY  
A. S. Eisenstadt

Volume I

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*To the Memory of My Mother and Father*

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*Designed by Audrey Sinclair*

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A. S. E.

## Introduction

This book is designed to serve as an introduction to its subject: the writing of American history, as it is practiced in the United States today. Containing thirty-three essays by many of our major historians, it is a handbook on the craft of American history by the master craftsmen themselves.

The anthology is meant to meet an obvious need, for there are all too few guides for those undertaking, either on the undergraduate or the graduate level, the study of writing American history. Those that do exist tend to deal more with the techniques of historical writing than with its nature; they are more concerned with form than with substance. Often lacking any organized or broad introduction to the subject, the student is left to learn the hard way, by a long and costly process of trial and error—as much error, in many instances, as trial. Learning the hard way frequently means not having an opportunity to learn well. This anthology seeks to assist the student in resolving these problems: it deals with the various aspects of American historical writing, substance no less than form, and premises no less than process; it helps to bring him into an early cognizance of the many questions that will confront him in his study and in his writing; and it opens up to him the possibilities and varieties which the study of the past affords.

In selecting the essays, the editor has been guided by a few basic rules. Stating these will further help to make clear just what the anthology is and what it purports to do.

1. Because the principal aim has been to introduce the student to the contemporary world of American historical writing, essays have been included that date from the period since World War II—the preponderance, indeed, from the past decade.

2. In making the selections, the editor has tapped the rich and diverse sources of our professional and semi-professional historical journals and of our journals of opinion and criticism. Here may be found our foremost historians, working out in the open, as it were, discoursing upon the central problems of their craft. The wide variety of periodicals represented in this volume is not readily available to the student. Precisely because of their availability, books dealing with the study and writing of American history have not been canvassed; such books, in fact, are generally concerned with a particular problem or theme, not with the subject as a whole. The following is a list of the journals from which the essays have been taken:

The American Archivist	Labor History
American Heritage	The Mississippi Valley Historical
The American Historical Review	Review
American Quarterly	The New England Quarterly
Business History Review	Political Science Quarterly
The Centennial Review	The Saturday Review
Commentary	The South Atlantic Quarterly
Diogenes	Southwest Review
Foreign Affairs	Vermont Quarterly
History and Theory	The Virginia Quarterly Review
Iowa Journal of History	The Western Humanities
The Journal of Modern History	Review
The Journal of Negro History	The Wisconsin Magazine of
The Journal of Social Issues	History

3. The anthology consists of complete essays, the editor having avoided presenting an essay either in part or out of context. Each essay thus stands as an independent and self-contained representation of its author's viewpoint. The footnotes accompanying the original essay have, for the sake of completeness and scholarship, also been reproduced. Obvious typographical errors have been corrected, but stylistic preferences have been retained.

4. With but a few exceptions, this book consists of essays by American historians discussing problems and themes of American history. The study of the American past is the largest single concern of our professional historians in the courses they teach and the histories they write. It merits individual and particular attention for this reason. The study of American history, moreover, presents its own distinct problems and characteristics in

regard to many of the themes it deals with, the sources that students of American history have accessible to them, and the kind of training they receive in our colleges and universities. These essays will, accordingly, serve the student as a practical, valid, and effective guide to the work he will be doing in both his advanced undergraduate and graduate courses.

But whatever distinctive features and concerns the study of American history presents, it also relates in many ways to the study of other fields of history. From the vantage ground of the American past, the historian may look out upon the contours of the whole study of the past. The anthology will help the student attain these larger perspectives.

5. The choice of a particular essay was made for one or more of several specific reasons. The essay deals with a central problem in the study and writing of American history. It is well written. It reflects a particular approach to the American past. In it an historian speaks on a subject within his special competence. The anthology is, in this way, meant to be a dialogue among contemporary writers of American history on several major problems of their craft. As a dialogue, the anthology inevitably contains viewpoints that often converge and no less often differ.

6. Because of very limited space, it has not been possible to include articles on all major problems with which the individual who studies the writing of American history will be concerned. The choices, moreover, have been governed by the unavailability, for a variety of reasons, of essays on particular subjects and problems. But the anthology, it should be noted again, is nowhere meant to be anything but a selection and an introduction.

The organization of the anthology and the subjects with which it is concerned were dictated not by any previous design, but rather by the essays that American historians, including some of the principal members of the guild, have been writing in recent years. These essays converge on several larger questions, and it is the answer to these questions which constitutes the subject matter of the respective sections of the anthology: a. What are the nature and uses of history? b. What is the historian's role in ascertaining historical truth? c. What has been the course of American historiography, in general, and what, in particular, has been the significance of the grand theses of Charles Austin Beard and Frederick Jackson Turner? d. How is the American past being rewritten by our own generation?



e. What are the various forms and types of American historical writing? f. What are the interrelations between the discipline of American history and other disciplines? g. What problems and possibilities do research and writing present?

Introductory notes accompany each section of the anthology. These define the nature, importance, and various aspects of the problem that the particular section is concerned with. They view the problem from an historical perspective, suggesting how our own historians' treatment of it is related to that of other historians in other ages. The notes, moreover, tell something about the professional achievements and qualifications of the author of each essay. In effect, then, the introductory notes seek to lay out the conditions of the discussion that proceeds in the essays themselves.

The essays that follow offer interest, challenge, indeed excitement. The reader is invited to enter a lyceum conducted by some of the foremost writers of American history and to listen to their learned discourses. For the novice, the essays will serve to canvass the larger dimensions of the craft he is entering upon and to encourage him to seek out its wider reaches on his own. For the student already initiated, the essays will serve as the occasion for a fresh rethinking of the basic principles and purposes of his calling.

A. S. E.

## PART ONE

### The Nature and Uses of History

#### *Introductory Notes*

"It is the object of the present work to explain how the change in the condition of our land has been brought about; and, as the fortunes of a nation are not under the control of blind destiny, to follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory." These were the words with which George Bancroft opened his grandly conceived *History of the United States*, a work whose ten volumes, appearing at different intervals from 1834 to 1874, spanned the most critical years of the republic. The *History* was a paean to the sovereignty of the American people and to the growth of American liberty. In his lofty exordium, Bancroft did more than state his theme: in defining the way he construed the American past, he also indicated his conception of the nature and uses of history. He answered questions which lie at the center of historical study.

These questions await the individual—novice or experienced historian, amateur or professional—who explores the past. What is the nature of historical inquiry? Is history a science or an art? Can the study of the past be reduced to objective rules which insure objective conclusions, or does it exceed these, depending ultimately on the person and insight of the historian himself? How valid is H. Stuart Hughes's belief, in *History as Art and as*

*Science* (1964), that history is both art and science and that it can be "more conscious of its assumptions and its intellectual procedures—without losing its aesthetic quality?" Again, how far is the historian an appraiser of earlier values and institutions, how far a detached judge? And what is it that the historian is seeking to do? Is he concerned with presenting a narrative of events, with reconstructing the actuality of the past, with explaining why certain things happened, with estimating the relative importance of great men and great forces, with delineating the larger tendencies of social movement? Clearly, each of these tasks falls within his responsibility, but precisely how, in what combination, to what degree?

What methods should the historian use in conducting his inquiry? What command must he have of his sources, primary and secondary, and how extensively should he range among them? If the whole past is properly the domain of history, should he not seek the intelligences of other areas of knowledge? But to what extent and in what arrangement, and how should he define his scope to insure his art? How shall he deal with the question of causation? What causes change? If he is to resist historical determinisms—economic, social, or psychological—what are his alternatives? How have our master historians answered the question of why things happened and changed, how effectively, and with what validity? How far, indeed, can the historian satisfactorily answer the question of causation?

And what are the uses of history? Should it serve as entertainment? Should it be written to interest the broad public and, in the words of Macaulay, "supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies?" Should the study of the past be instructive? Is it true that history repeats itself and that the present has much to learn from the lessons of the past? Does history serve as part of a larger societal belief, and is it in that respect the means whereby the present justifies itself by appealing to certain aspects of the past? Is history, therefore, as Napoleon said, a fable agreed upon, or, as Voltaire put it, the tricks that the living play upon the dead? And if the past that society knows is in very large measure a myth, why does the myth arise, what particular function does it play, and what influence may it exert on the way society advances or fails to advance?

Historians are far from agreed about the answers to these questions. To any single question, the answers may be not only substantially different, but diametrically opposed. What, for

example, should be the principal concern of historical inquiry? According to George Burton Adams, who taught at Yale and worked in medieval history, it was to be the establishment and classification of facts, to the fullest extent possible. But according to his contemporary, Albert Bushnell Hart, a Harvard professor who achieved fame as a writer, teacher, and editor, historians were to escape from an obsession with facts and seek "the great lines of historical evolution." In shaping the course of history, what has been the importance of the great leader, on the one hand, and of broad social movements, on the other? Thomas Carlyle's well-known aphorism is that "history is the biography of great men." But to this Edward Hallett Carr has answered that a great man is really inseparable from a great movement, for he is "at once the representative and the creator of social forces which change the shape of the world and the thoughts of men."

Has the history of man proceeded according to certain principles or laws? Edward P. Cheyney, one of America's foremost authorities on Elizabethan England, believed that it had, and that "men have on the whole played the parts assigned to them; they have not written the play." But Goldwin Smith, the Anglo-Canadian publicist and onetime Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, doubted that man's experience could in any way be reduced to laws, because man's free will and unforeseen events both combined to turn the course of history in new and different directions. A similar view was later voiced in Sir Isaiah Berlin's argument, in *Historical Inevitability* (1954), that the past reveals no inexorable laws governing human development.

Should historians use their study of the past for the purpose of solving the problems of the present? By all means, said Frederick Jackson Turner, author of the famous "frontier hypothesis" and teacher of several generations of students at Wisconsin and Harvard: history should not be merely antiquarian, it should "hold the lamp for conservative reform." However, Charles H. McIlwain, a colleague of Turner's at Harvard, whose principal works dealt with constitutional history and thought, believed that the past ought to be studied for its own sake and looked at in its own light; he was very wary about trying to make the past serve the needs of the present. And if the sentiment of the famous English medievalist, T. F. Tout, was that "we investigate the past not to deduce practical lessons, but to find out what really happened," that of another

famous English medievalist, Geoffrey Barraclough, has been "that the past impinges at every turn on the present" and that "the task of ensuring that the relationship of past and present shall be a right relationship is therefore a practical question, which may well contribute to the shaping of the future."

Looking out from their respective fields, different historians have put different constructions on the tendency of history, the direction in which human life moves. Edward Channing, one of America's foremost historians and a colleague of Hart's at Harvard, began his multi-volume *History of the United States* with the pronouncement that he sought "to see in the annals of the past the story of living forces, always struggling onward and upward toward that which is better in human conception." Sir Lewis Namier, whose most significant volumes deal with British politics during the early part of the reign of George III, was doubtful whether any of the great European revolutions had achieved its goals, believing that "when man has wiped the slate clean and tries to write his own message, the past which lives in him and has moulded him will bring back the very things he has tried to obliterate." But Professor Carr, who has for many years been at work on a monumental *History of Soviet Russia*, differs substantially with Sir Lewis, believing instead that "progress in human affairs . . . has come mainly through the bold readiness of human beings . . . to present fundamental challenges in the name of reason to the current way of doing things."

A variety of answers to some basic questions confronting the student of the past will be found in the essays that follow. Seeking to arrive at an understanding of the *nature* and *uses* of history, their authors proceed by many routes, some confluent, some parallel, some going in opposite directions. Each author, however, brings to the problem he is concerned with a rich store of experience in the writing and teaching of history. In his notable book, *Backwoods Utopias* (1950), Arthur E. Bestor, of the University of Washington, has studied the evolution of communitarian socialism in America during the years 1663-1829. In two other books, *Educational Wastelands* (1953) and *The Restoration of Learning* (1955), Professor Bestor profoundly criticized certain tendencies in modern American education. In his essay on "The Humaneness of History," accordingly, he looks at the study of the past in terms of its nature as an intellectual discipline and its value in liberal arts education. William Bradford Willcox, whose general interest lies in British history, has been

more particularly concerned with Britain's role in the War of American Independence. His works include *Gloucestershire: A Study in Local Government* (1940), *Star of Empire: A Study of Britain as a World Power* (1950) and *Portrait of a General: Sir Henry Clinton in the War of Independence* (1964), for which he won the Bancroft prize. On the basis of his interests and writings, Professor Willcox has analyzed the problem of change on a local and an international scale, and the observations his essay contains are especially rewarding.

Perhaps the most important single problem facing the student of history is that of causation, or explaining why events occurred. In their respective essays on what caused the Civil War, Lee Benson and Cushing Strout use the particular—the question of why the war came—to offer illuminating suggestions about the problem in general. Lee Benson has done signal work in bringing under close scrutiny the methods by which historians arrive at their findings: having himself borrowed the techniques of modern social science in his own researches, he has urged the use of these techniques upon his fellow historians as a means of insuring that they raise valid questions and come up with valid answers. Among his writings are *Merchants, Farmers, and Railroads: Railroad Regulation and New York Politics, 1850–87* (1955) and *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (1961). Cushing Strout, of Cornell University, has brought a sophisticated intelligence to the history of American ideas. In *The American Image of the Old World* (1963), he traced the way Americans have defined their own identity vis-à-vis Europe and the changing influence this self-definition has had on American politics and culture; and in an earlier volume, *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl Becker and Charles Beard* (1958), he dealt with a critical turning-point in the development of American historical writing.

The past, as we have seen, serves the present in many ways. Among the most significant of these ways is its service as social myth. History is that sufficient image of the past which each generation formulates to make intelligible the world about it, to ascertain where it came from and where it means to go. History as myth may speak a societal wish, express a disappointment, compensate for a sense of inadequacy, set a goal. In this way each society nominates its heroes and villains, erects its own pantheon, rationalizes its defeats in past wars and justifies its struggle in wars that continue. Here is the special interest that

may be found in the essay of Frank Vandiver, of Rice University, on "The Confederate Myth." A revealing commentary on the uses of history, the essay grows out of Professor Vandiver's extensive work in the field of Civil War history, to which he has contributed several notable biographies.

However different their themes or points of concentration, all the essays extend to the student an invitation to the study and writing of history, one that offers great appeal and great challenge. The student will wish to listen carefully to the various voices of his mentors, keeping his mind open, his faculties alert, his vision broad. Having closely pondered the words of the essays that follow, he will wish to move on to other mentors and other perspectives, conscious always that the approach to the past is as rich and various as human experience itself.

### *Suggestions for Further Reading*

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- Nevins, Allan, "Is History Made by Heroes?," *Saturday Review*, XXXVIII (November 5, 1955), 9-10, 42-45.
- Susman, Warren I., "History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past," *American Quarterly*, XVI (Summer 1964), 243-263.
- Van Alstyne, Richard W., "History and the Imagination," *Pacific Historical Review*, XXXIII (February 1964), 1-24.
- Wilkins, Burleigh T., "Pragmatism as a Theory of Historical Knowledge: John Dewey on the Nature of Historical Inquiry," *American Historical Review*, LXIV (July 1959), 878-890.
- Woodward, C. Vann, "Can We Believe Our Own History?" *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, V (February 1954), 2-6, 16.

## 1. *The Humaneness of History*\*

ARTHUR BESTOR

No member of the human race—living, dead, or unborn—has ever been or ever will be quite like me. You know this about yourself as certainly as I know it about myself. Whence this incredible self-assurance? I shall never meet more than an infinitesimal fraction of the human race. I take it for granted that there are millions of men exactly like me in height, weight, and physical characteristics. Multitudes, I know, stand with me at the same midpoint on the scale between affluence and poverty, bravery and cowardice, brilliance and stupidity. It is true that an expert on fingerprints will tell me that no one else has exactly the same whorls on the tips of his fingers as I. Nevertheless, my sense of my own identity certainly does not arise from this trivial assurance; I don't even understand the technique he uses to tell one fingerprint from another.

To prove that I am necessarily different from anyone born in a past century is simple enough. I have travelled on a jet plane and none of them ever did. And I am different from anyone who may be born hereafter because I have had some experience of a world in which there were no jet planes. If any person is exactly like me, he must be found among my contemporaries. But he must have other qualifications as well. He must have grown up in the same surroundings that somehow shaped me. He must have undergone the same experiences, done the same things, read the same books, and met the same persons. If, as Tennyson's Ulysses said, "I am a part of all that I have met," then the converse is necessarily true: All that I have met is part of me. And I am sure that no one has shadowed me through life so

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closely as to have reproduced in his experience the pattern of mine.

The distinctiveness I claim for myself is the product of one thing: history. I am different from others because of what I have done or thought, or what has happened to me, at various times in the past. My sense of my own identity is grounded neither in anatomy nor physiology but in historical experience. Deprive me of my consciousness of that—let my memory be eclipsed by amnesia—and, in the most literal sense, I do not know who I am.

There is another side to the coin. I am not totally unlike my fellowmen. Wherever I have lived there have been multitudes living in the same community with me. We are somewhat alike because we have seen and been impressed by many of the same things. I practice a profession that thousands of others are practicing, many of them unknown to me. Dispersed as we are, we are all somewhat alike, for we have been trained in much the same way, have read many of the same things, have worked under similar conditions, have considered the same kinds of problems. Divergent though our solutions to these problems may be, no one can miss the common element in all our answers.

Thus I belong to many groups. And what makes me a member of each group is some fragment of history, some experience in my past that coincides with some experience in theirs. Without history I would have no companions. Not only would I cease to be myself, I would also cease to be, in any real sense, a human being.

No one knows how clearly a dog or a cat remembers and how cogently he reflects upon his past experience. From outside we can see that he has become what he now is by things that have been done for or to him. To the extent that we imagine him conscious of the pattern of his own past, to that extent we endow him (rightly or wrongly) with attributes that belong, as at least we know, to men and women. The fact that human beings have been shaped by the past does not distinguish them from the rest of the animal creation. What is probably unique is human awareness of having been so shaped. And one measure of the humaneness of human beings is the extent to which they try to make sense of this past, groping thereby toward some sort of self-understanding and some degree of foresight.

Societies are even more purely the products of history than are the human beings who compose them. Biological factors, independent of history, condition the latter but not the former.

A society exists because of some linkage, in the dimension of time, among the men and women who make it up. There can be nothing but a momentary and evanescent society unless these linkages stretch deep into the past. No society is capable of acting as a society unless these historical linkages are sufficiently strong and respected for men to trust them as a footing for the steps they wish to take. Finally, no society can move forward in a rational way until the members composing it have attempted to comprehend the historical forces that brought their society into being. Only by understanding the forces of history can men hope to deflect and guide them and perhaps harness them to the task of making society itself more expressive of humane ideals and aspirations.

This is a changing world. And change is the source of both our deepest anxieties and our highest hopes. Now it is history alone that reveals this as a changing world. And it is history alone that investigates—in all its length and all its human bearings—the universal fact of change. There is no substitute for the study of history in the education of men who seek freedom through the understanding of themselves and the world they live in. *A fortiori* there is no substitute for the study of history in the education of free men who aspire to direct the course of change instead of submitting themselves, in resignation, to it.

Children who are taught to live only in the present are thereby condemned as adults to live forever in the past. The present they thought they knew vanishes before their eyes, to be replaced by a new and unrecognizable present, the product of historical forces they have never learned to understand. They find themselves lost in the dimension of time, a dimension of whose existence they were hardly aware. When the citizens of a nation do not know the sequence of events that brought them to where they are, they are powerless to decide the further path they ought to take. Panic may destroy them, when wisdom, born of knowledge and perspective, might have enabled them to surmount their actual perils. Ignorant of history, they have become the prisoners—and even the victims—of history.

How can any collection of pieces of information about past events—any assortment of names and dates—perform so high and humane a function? The answer, of course, is that they cannot. History is not a collection of facts, it is a way of thinking. It is not even a way of thinking about facts, it is a way of thinking about evidence. Though history may be described as

the memory of the human race, its method is not the method of memory, it is the method of logic. The historian does not *recall* what has happened in the past, he *discovers* by a process of reasoning what has happened. And he makes his discoveries in the only way they can possibly be made—by drawing inferences about the past from things that actually exist in the present. Like every other science, history is a structure of inference, built up from things that are immediately observable, and built up by the exercise of reason.

The inescapable characteristic of a past event—whether it be of public or only of personal importance—is that it can no longer be observed or experienced directly. Logically it is not even conceivable that one might learn about the past by reproducing it, because it would be impossible to know that the reproduction resembled the original event unless one possessed antecedent knowledge, independently arrived at, about the original event itself. A re-enactment of history—assuming it could be managed—would add no tittle of information about the past to that which we already knew, for the simple reason that any hitherto unrecorded event occurring in the re-enactment could not be shown to have happened before. If history repeats itself, only historical investigation can reveal that it is doing so.

In strict logic, everything that has just been said must also be said about any experiment or observation in the natural sciences. One can verify a scientific experiment or observation by repeating it only if one possesses a full and accurate record of the original experiment or observation—that is to say, only if there is some *historical* record. In other words, historical inference is actually an element in every scientific investigation. Because, however, scientific observations and experiments are recorded with such deliberate attention to exact detail, no notice is usually taken of the preliminary train of reasoning involved—reasoning that proceeds from the evidence in hand (*i.e.*, the written record of a previous observation) to an inference about what actually happened on the occasion recorded.

## II

The process of inference that is so simple for the scientist that he can afford to overlook it, becomes infinitely complex when the haphazard records of human activity in general come into view. The drawing of inferences from such records becomes an

enterprise in itself. It is, in fact, the historical enterprise. And it is precisely the same enterprise in which any private person is engaged when he seeks to ascertain, for his own purposes, exactly what he did, or obliged himself to do, on some past occasion. It is this identity of method that Carl Becker pointed to when he employed the apt phrase "Everyman His Own Historian."

History—whether public or private—can be known only when and only because something that exists in the present bears some mark that was impressed upon it by a past event. Certain of these marks are impressed on the living cells of the human brain, but they share the vicissitudes of the cells themselves—changing and fading and ultimately perishing. Much more durable marks of the past are impressed upon objects or artifacts—pots and weapons and coins, charred bones, and the tiles from ruined walls. These belong to the present, but they are vestiges of the past. They are evidence that something happened. By intricate chains of reasoning one can infer what did happen—one can reconstruct the events that will account for the place and the condition and the form in which these objects now lying before us were found.

Not essentially different are the written words of which the historian makes use. They too are survivals. They bear marks impressed upon them in the past—marks of chisel or pen or type. They are evidence of specific events that occurred in the past. At the very least they are evidence of the acts of chiseling or writing or printing that produced them. But they are obviously evidence of very much besides. The marks were deliberately made, and for a purpose. The purpose was unlikely to have been that of informing the future historian—indeed the purpose may have been to mislead him. But inferences are immediately possible—inferences about time and place and person and motive. Most of these inferences can be validated by inferences of the same kind drawn from other written records. As more and more sources come under examination, most of these inferences achieve the cumulative support that builds up toward certainty. Gradually a picture emerges of the event or series of events that impelled so many men to set down in writing what they did. Gradually the discrepancies among their accounts of what happened begin to be resolved. Eventually the historian can construct a narrative or an analysis, each item of which is the endpoint of a chain of reasoning that goes back not to some received

"fact" but to some piece of evidence. Indeed the items of his narrative are what are usually referred to as the "hard facts" of history. Facts they may properly be called, but not with the connotations that sometimes attach to the word. They are not the raw materials of history, they are the end-products of the first stage of historical reasoning.

Historical investigation does not stop here. Each stage of historical reasoning—that is, of historical inference and historical generalization—is the foundation of a higher stage. Among the disparate pieces of information (the "hard facts") ascertained by the process of inference just described, there appear to be certain clear and significant relationships. The next task of the historian is to examine these relationships. The result is a series of generalizations belonging to what we may consider the second level of historical reasoning. Instead of saying what Smith and Jones and Carter were doing, we can say something about what the workmen of Manchester were doing. We can begin to talk of groups and parties and nations. Generalizations of this kind can be true only in the way that statements about the crime-rate can be true; they describe what was going on, by and large, within a defined group of men and women, not what was happening to each or every member of the group. We are modulating into a statistical conception of human affairs. And we are obliged to do so if we are to think about what men collectively have done.

An identical process of generalization goes on in all the social sciences as well as in history. At this second level of reasoning, the logical processes employed by history are substantially the same as those of the social sciences. Only at this stage, however, is there much kinship between the various fields. As the historian mounts to a third level of generalization he enters a realm which the other social sciences are not equipped to explore. The relationships that now interest him are the relationships between past and present, or between a remote past and one less remote. The unique concern of history becomes at last fully evident. This is its concern with change—not change within a narrow segment of time, but change as it has gone on through an endless procession of centuries; not change affecting one particularized area of human activity, but change as it has pervaded the whole of human affairs, creating historical eras that are distinguished from one another in all their multifarious yet interrelated aspects.

Even here, however, the concern of history is still with the particular. Its conclusions have to do with the causes of *this* revolution in *this* country, or the results of *this* war between *these* nations at *this* period of time. The story of mankind as a whole is told by linking together, end to end, these specific explanations. The explanations are specific, but they are by no means simple. They are products of an intricate chain of reasoning, carried on at the three levels I have described. Despite their apparent specificity, historical conclusions about cause and effect in a particular situation are actually generalizations of a very high order. And the ability to make them is the ability to think historically.

Beyond this level of generalization, historians venture with trepidation and reserve. The ladder of inference is already perilously extended. Many historians believe that their discipline has achieved all it is capable of achieving when it has provided the intricate explanations that knit together the great sequences of particular events. Nevertheless it is apparent that between one revolution in one country and another revolution in another country there are certain resemblances, as there are between one war in one century and another in another. To speculate upon these resemblances, and thus to venture upon a fourth level of historical generalization, is tempting. Some few historians, goaded perhaps by the social scientists, boldly enter this realm, hoping ultimately to discover some completely general laws of history, comparable to the laws of physics. A smaller few—among them Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee—believe they can already see in universal history certain recurrent patterns that explain (or even determine) the vast movements of the whole. Most historians are skeptical of such pretensions. They are content to reflect upon the coincidences of pattern that they occasionally perceive, without assuming that these reflect some undiscovered law of the universe or some ultimate design at the very heart of things.

This very tentativeness occasions scorn in many beholders. What kind of knowledge is it, they demand, which professes in the end to furnish no laws, no predictions, no universal conclusions? The only appropriate answer, I think, is that the kind of knowledge history offers is human knowledge—knowledge about beings infinitely various, unpredictably brave and unpredictably cowardly, successful in their designs at one time, unsuccessful at another. Time is the dimension in which the his-

torian works. Over a short period, statistical methods may enable one to predict, within fair limits of accuracy, what a fixed proportion of a particular group will probably do. Prolong the time and the exceptions begin to count. Prolong it indefinitely, as history prolongs it, and uniformities are destroyed by the cumulative effect of the variability inherent in human nature, just as in the biological world the minute variations that occur in the otherwise uniform processes of heredity are magnified by time into the evolution of new species.

History is the history of human beings. Its very tentativeness, its unwillingness to predict, furnish, perhaps, the surest warranty of its truthfulness, for these qualities accord with human experience. An individual man, reflecting upon his own career, can discover some of its springs of action. But if, in some ultimate way, he is under the control of universal laws that determine his every thought and deed, he himself cannot discover or imagine what these laws may be. The historian cannot project into the past a greater determinism that he (and his fellowmen) can discover in their own present lives.

The analogy with personal experience holds good for the values as well as the limitations of historical reflection. Men, if they are wise, reach their personal decisions by pondering their own previous experience. They do not expect automatic answers. They do not expect the gift of prophecy. What they expect—and what they receive—is data from which they can calculate their expectations, and alternatives from among which they can choose their course of action. In the gamble of life, the odds are on foresight. This is about all one can say, but it is a great deal when one considers how high are the stakes. History, properly understood, can give man the advantage of these odds. Sir Walter Raleigh put the matter well: "In a word, we may gather out of History a policy no less wise than eternal; by the comparison and application of other mens fore-passed miseries with our own like errors and ill-deservings."

Intelligence is the ability to take thought; wisdom the ability to take thought about human affairs. There are, of course, many valid ways of thinking about human affairs. Among them—high among them—is history. This is not because the facts it presents are of transcendent importance. Taken one by one they are not. It is not because the conclusions history reaches are of impressive certitude. They cannot be. History deserves a central position in every sound program of liberal education because of the

means it provides for disentangling and comprehending the problems of human existence. The judgments that history makes upon public affairs are one in method and spirit with the judgments that men must make upon private affairs. The habits engendered by thinking about one, reinforce and discipline the habits of thought applied to the other.

In the final analysis, however, history deserves its high place because it goes to the very core of human experience. Its unique characteristic is that it presents human affairs under the aspect not of eternity but of time. So long as mankind swims in the current of time—that is, till the world ends—so long must men look behind them to judge what is likely to lie ahead. History is their lifelong companion. It is fallible as every man is fallible. But it is likewise trustworthy, as a man is trustworthy who has looked into himself and come to know how blended are dust and fire in the innermost recesses of the human heart.



## 2. *An Historian Looks at Social Change*\*

W. B. WILLCOX

### *Historical Causation*

Historians are a conservative lot. Perhaps because their discipline is old, perhaps because it is extremely complex, they are slower than most social scientists to experiment with new concepts and techniques. This is not to say that their methodology is static. It is influenced, subtly but inevitably, by the intellectual currents of their times—by mechanistic rationalism in the 18th century, Darwinism and Marxism in the 19th, the teachings of Freud in the 20th. But the influence is slow and sporadic, and even when the profession has ostensibly accepted new ways of thought it clings unwittingly to the old. Take for example the hoary definition of history as past politics. No historian worth his salt would now openly accept this definition, because it is palpably too simple to be true. Yet some write history, many more teach it, and even more learn it, as if it were no more than a chain of cause and effect, in which the essential links are political actions consciously contrived by men to further their conscious interests. This part of history so often does duty for the whole, not only with the general public but also among social scientists, that many of the latter regard the discipline as a mere chronicling of human actions in the past. They are shocked to be told that this conception is as inadequate as it is popular.

It is popular for obvious reasons. A sequence of events, each a sufficient cause of the one that follows, is easy to write about, to teach, and to memorize; hence it makes few intellectual

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demands upon the author, the instructor, or the student. It also purports to account for change. The sequence is a primitive organization of events along a time axis, and change is the consecutive effect that the events, comprehended along that single axis, have on one another; development may be seen by moving forward in time, causation by moving backward. Here is a simple sequential logic, which seems plausible as far as it goes. But it does not go far, and its validity depends on a metaphor that is hallowed by long usage but grossly misleading: there is no "chain" of cause and effect. Each event has an almost infinite number of causal roots and an equal number of effects, and these ramifications have neither beginning nor end; the historian, although he must arbitrarily limit himself to a certain area if he is not to have the whole of history on his hands, must approach events in that area as an enormously complex set of interrelationships, not as links in a chain. The idea of a chain has its uses, just as the multiplication table has; but sequence is no more the whole of history than multiplication is of mathematics.

If the discipline is more than a chronicling of past actions, what else does it include? One element is the biographical, because the people who acted were ingredients of the action itself. They may or may not have acted with conscious purpose, but all the participants to some extent affected the outcome. The whole person is involved in whatever he does; his motive is not simple greed or fear or ambition, but such a tangle of emotions and desires as no historian can hope to separate into its component parts. If, then, people are causally related to what happens, the biographical approach to history involves a system of change much more complex than the organization of events along a time axis. Human beings are agents of change, and the agent is the total person. The historian cannot segregate one particular characteristic of that person, and say that it accounts for one particular change; he can only take a group of people in their totality, and say that their interaction on one another contributed—in a way that he cannot precisely define—to a given change.

To what extent does change result from the volition of people, conscious or unconscious, and to what extent from impersonal forces beyond the control of individuals or groups? The answer on one extreme is that man makes his own history and is in fact the master of his fate; the answer on the

other extreme is that his history is made for him by pressures that he is powerless in the long run to deflect or modify. The opposition between these two points of view, although couched in modern secular terms, is essentially the old opposition between free will and predestination. Historians are not primarily concerned with resolving the opposition; but they do have to recognize its existence, for it determines the gamut within which they interpret change. At one extreme is the great-man theory of history, which puts its emphasis on the free will of certain individuals. At the other is historical determinism, which is predestination in secular dress. Both these extremes have had their day, and have shown their inadequacy.

The great-man theory is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the biographical approach. The historian, fascinated by a figure who seems to overshadow an entire period, yields perhaps unwittingly to the temptation to see in that person the primary reason for change. Thus Henry VIII singlehanded "caused" the English Reformation, and the genius of Napoleon "created" the Napoleonic Empire. A logical concomitant is what may be called the little-man theory, which holds that the absence of greatness may play as crucial a role as its presence. The character of Nicholas II, for example, doomed the czarist regime, and the political incapacity of Louis XVI (or, according to one author, his sexual impotence) brought on the French Revolution. This kind of history, with its romantic overemphasis on the effect of great men, or of little men in great places, has the appeal of any argument *ad hominem*. The writer or reader can easily imagine himself into the shoes of a human being whose strength or weakness is shaping the course of events, whereas no one can become emotionally excited by contemplating geography or the price revolution as causes of change. The concept that people make history is oversimplified, like the concept of a chain of cause and effect, because it leaves out a great part of causation; it is inherently vague, because it emphasizes the agents of change that are least susceptible to precise investigation. But its very defects give it a persistent psychological appeal that more scientific concepts lack.

The attempt to make history a science began with the exaltation of impersonal forces. Economic determinism, under the influence of the Marxists, seemed for a time to be becoming the historian's religion; everything had to have an economic cause, in the class struggle and the evolution of capitalism,

and great men and events were regarded as mere froth on the surface of change. The Weber-Tawney thesis, that capitalism was causally related to the rise of Protestantism, is a case in point; another is the theory that the impoverishment of the ruling classes was a major factor in producing the Puritan Revolution. Such generalizations are provocative and helpful in breaking down the stereotypes of earlier historiography. They are also exciting because they suggest at least the possibility of a more comprehensive explanation of change, one that transcends the simple sequential logic of the chronicle and the complex but imprecise factors of personality. The optimist even hopes for a universal theory of change, which draws for its methodology upon the newest techniques of the social sciences (in this instance economics and statistics) and rises to a level of generality that historians before the advent of these sciences had never been able to achieve.

But are they able to achieve such a level now? The evidence on which generalities are built is almost never adequate for proper quantification, and statistical analysis is rarely convincing to any one except the analyst. The result is endless controversy, as witness that over the economic status of the gentry before the Puritan Revolution, where the data support a variety of conclusions, the argument has gone on for years, and the end is not yet in sight. Any historical theory broad enough to be valuable is by its very nature vulnerable. It can never be proved, and is never accepted as even probable without a long battle, during which it is likely to be amended and qualified almost out of recognition. Those that are finally accepted in one generation, furthermore, are often discarded in the next. The progress of the social sciences constantly enlarges the historian's intellectual equipment, and he must re-examine old theories in the light of new knowledge. He must also assess for himself, in terms of his particular subject, the importance of any kind of determinism in relation to other forms of causation. Impersonal forces are a part of the whole complex of change, but only a part.

### *A Case Study in Complexity*

The writing of history has developed, like most disciplines, from the simple to the more and more complex. Each school of thought influenced its successors, and the modern historian

is the heir of them all. He must recognize the causal connection between events that were separated in time; he must be familiar with the character of the key actors in each event; he must determine which impersonal forces—intellectual, economic, technological—were at work to mold the outcome. Finally, he must weigh the effect of sheer accident, of the event that could not in any possible way have been predicted beforehand.

As a case study in his problems of causation, take the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The events that composed it—the voyage of William of Orange from the Netherlands to England, the flight and deposition of James II, and the subsequent constitutional settlement—resulted directly from the political actions taken by King James, and indirectly from “past politics” in the reign of Charles II and even before. These antecedent events stretch out before the historian, looking backward from the vantage point of 1688, like trees interlocked in a jungle. He must mark off arbitrarily the limits of his investigation, and decide perhaps to ignore all events before 1660, or all developments overseas, as causal factors. He then explores the area of his choice and picks out what seem to him to be the salient antecedents of revolution, realizing always that the full complexity of what occurred is hidden from him and hence that his selection and emphasis are based on partial knowledge. When he turns from actions to those who participated in them, he must weigh the characters of James and of his son-in-law, William of Orange; perhaps of William’s wife and of her younger sister, Anne; of as many Whig and Tory politicians as come within his view, and particularly of King James’ trusted and untrustworthy general, John Churchill, later Duke of Marlborough. The revolution was made by all its participants, and the character of each to some degree influenced the outcome. Here again the historian must limit himself arbitrarily to those whose roles he considers crucial, and even about them he will not have sufficient evidence to be sure of their motivation.

The actions that they took did not occur in a vacuum. The very existence of the oligarchy that overthrew the king was rooted in the economic and religious conditions of the time, and the historian must ask himself whether those conditions were changing in ways that contributed to the great upheaval. Immediately he discovers that his question cannot be answered in terms of England alone; he must also consider France. Louis XIV, James II’s first cousin, posed as the champion of Roman Catholicism and was the great Con-

tinental exemplar of absolutism; James openly professed his relative's religion and sought to emulate his political system. At the same time France was expanding both commercially and geographically, with results that disturbed English merchants as much as English politicians. Did the revolutionaries of 1688 hate their king as a Papist, an absolutist, or a Francophile? The question so put is unanswerable, because they did not try to untangle their motives; fear of France, in Europe and overseas, combined with fear of Catholicism and of tyranny at home. The result was an explosion, but the nature and combination of the explosive ingredients cannot be precisely determined.

Such a complexity of causes, large and small, personal and impersonal, is more than any investigator can handle with complete assurance. In this case, furthermore, the causes did not produce the result by a self-contained logic of their own; they were assisted, as they usually are, by a series of unpredictable accidents, of which two were of crucial importance. One was the birth of a baby. In 1687 James' only children were two grown daughters, both Protestants born of an earlier marriage; and many moderate Anglicans were willing to endure a Papist king as long as they were assured of a Protestant successor. In the spring of 1688 James' second wife, a Roman Catholic, was pregnant for the first time; and he might have lived out his life on the throne if she had given birth to a daughter. Instead she had a son, and the situation changed overnight: the baby took precedence over his half-sisters, was sure to be raised as a Catholic, and hence embodied the threat of a permanently Catholic dynasty. Anglican caution gave way to desperation, and the Calvinist William of Orange was invited to England. Then came the second accident. The famous "Protestant wind" kept James' navy in port while it blew William's ships to a safe landing in Devon; a shift of wind, permitting a naval battle, might have ended the revolution before it began. *Dis aliter visum*. The chance of a child's sex, and of an easterly wind, precipitated the upheaval.

This example illustrates the methodological problems that beset the historian. He must weigh factors that are different in kind and almost infinite in number, and with ramifications that have no end. Here is no simple causal sequence. Instead a great number of disparate developments, originating far from one another in time and space, come together at a moment of crisis—the ambitions of French merchants, the view of monarchy held by James' father and grandfather and by his cousin across

the Channel, the English fear of Rome that went back to the Gunpowder Plot and before. Mixed with these long term developments are others of the moment itself, some more or less predictable and some as unpredictable as the wind. The whole complex might be considered as a system of stresses producing a highly unstable equilibrium, except that the very word "system" implies a kind of order that is not demonstrable. The historian must impose a measure of order upon the events he is studying, in order to handle them at all. But he must also distrust what he imposes.

### *The Unique Event*

Each of the ingredients with which he is dealing is so deeply imbedded in its surroundings that he cannot isolate it without falsifying its nature. The very act of describing it separates it to some extent from its context, and to that extent distorts it. His aim is to minimize such distortion by separating as little as possible, and by keeping his focus upon the whole constellation of events rather than upon its particular parts. If one part could be isolated for his inspection, he would regard it with profound skepticism. The disembodied cause is unreal; the cause in its setting contributes to the reality—which cannot be fully apprehended but nevertheless exists—of the constellation as a whole. That constellation is unique, and the historian's central concern is with its uniqueness.

This is not to say that he can afford to ignore similar constellations; far from it. If he is studying the Glorious Revolution, he should know as much as possible both about revolution as a phenomenon and about specific comparable revolutions. Generalizations that are universally applicable to the phenomenon are likely to be stimulating and may be extremely valuable. Suppose that he encounters the suggestion of a group of economic historians that three phases must exist in any development deserving the name of revolution: first, "the natural, normal process of change and adaptation; secondly, an obstacle or obstruction in the current of change; and thirdly, a more or less abrupt removal of the obstruction with correspondingly rapid and often violent readjustments." (Bowden, 1937, p. 109.) He first asks himself whether there was a "natural, normal process of change and adaptation" in the England of James II. His answer may well be no, because the process of political change was that initiated

by the King himself, and was anything but normal. Does the whole generalization then break down, or may the difficulty be that the revolution is misconceived? Should it perhaps be thought of as beginning with the accession of James and the opening of his campaign for royal absolutism? or even with the Whig attempt to alter the succession as early as 1678? If the revolution was in fact an affair of years and not of months, what was the antecedent process of change and what was the principal obstruction to it? Such questions may not admit of precise answers, but they help the historian to see both the broad outlines of his problem and also its peculiarities.

The same is true of comparisons and contrasts. The ways in which the Glorious Revolution differed from and resembled similar movements elsewhere throw light on its distinguishing characteristics. It differed, for example, from the Puritan Revolution of forty years earlier and from the French Revolution of a hundred years later in one important respect: the political earthquake of 1688 was not followed by a tidal wave of radicalism. Why not? Because it was a man-made upheaval that never escaped the control of its makers. So far so good, but why did it not escape? Perhaps because James bolted to France, and thereby made it possible to replace him quickly with another king. Did this happen in any other revolution? Certainly—when Charles X fled Paris in 1830 and was replaced by Louis Philippe. This comparison cannot be pushed far without highlighting the great differences between the two periods; the oligarchs of 1688 were a far cry from the Parisian bourgeois of 1830. But even the far cry has its uses. Comparisons, like generalizations, help to jolt the inquirer out of the rut of his research; they renew his sense of perspective and are likely to provoke fruitful questions.

This is usually the extent of their usefulness. The movement that the historian is examining is for him *sui generis*. He cannot uncover its peculiar character by equating it with another movement, in whole or in part, any more than he can by dissecting it into its constituent elements. Here he differs most markedly from other social scientists. *The historian is not primarily concerned with change as an ongoing process, or with formulating laws that may govern that process; his concern is with one particular phase of change, with one grouping of events that is by definition unique.* The point can be illustrated with an example from the border area between history and economics, the prob-



lem of the business cycle. The traditional focus of the economist has been upon the repetitive pattern of the cycle, rather than upon the variables that differentiate one phase from another; only recently has the idea gained ground that the variables, from which comes the uniqueness of any one phase, may be as important as the overall pattern. In other words, here the social scientist's usual concern with the general is being reinforced by the historian's concern with the particular.

To many social scientists, including some historians, this concept of a discipline that is rooted in uniqueness and essentially unconcerned with laws of change seems reactionary. Has not history always been seeking patterns, and is it not now succeeding, with the help of other disciplines, in establishing a higher level of generalization than ever before? The supreme example is the writings of the most famous living historian, Arnold Toynbee, who has reared a theoretical structure so ample that it embraces the whole of mankind's past. Surely this *Summa Historiae* indicates what can be done, given sufficient erudition, to break the fetters of the particular and find the universal laws that govern change? The answer, unfortunately, is that it indicates nothing of the sort. The "laws" are on such a high level of generalization that they have almost no relevance to the stuff of history. Toynbee attempts to demonstrate their operation by examples drawn from an enormous range of historical data, but the examples fit the generalizations in much the same way that the unhappy victims of Procrustes fitted his bed. If the historical fraternity has praised *A Study of History* less than the public at large, the reason is not mere professional conservatism. Toynbee has majestically overstepped the limits of the discipline.

#### *The Historian's Limitations*

The limits are imposed, not by the historian's volition, but by the nature of his data. Those data have two principal characteristics, which condition everything that he does: they are never complete, and they are inherently biased. Incompleteness is always present, regardless of his subject. He may have an enormous accumulation of material, but somewhere in it are gaps that he cannot fill and that preclude a full understanding. The records of the first Carthaginian War are few and far between, and the investigator must try to fill the lacunae by using his reason and imagination. The records of World War II, at the other extreme,

are so profuse that no single person in a lifetime can comb them all; yet even here there are mysteries, such as the death of Martin Bormann and the disposition of Hitler's body, that will never be resolved in full detail. The material for resolving them either never existed or is no longer extant; details are blurred because they were not recorded at the time, and those who witnessed and lived to tell gave conflicting accounts. The researcher hot for certainty, to paraphrase Meredith, gets only a dusty answer.

The incompleteness of historical data is matched by their inherent bias. We have no record of events *per se*; they do not record themselves like earthquakes on a seismograph. All we have is such impressions as observers thought fit to put down in writing, and the impression obviously varies with the observer. Even if he is attempting, as he occasionally is, to tell the truth as objectively as possible, he is the creature of his own unanalyzed and often unconscious preconceptions; and the more important the event, the less objective he is likely to be.

Take for instance two accounts of the storming of the Bastille, one by a member of the *ancien régime* and one by a Jacobin: no matter how honest the two men may have been, the event described by one has a quite different flavor from that described by the other. The historian can never see the event itself, in Ranke's famous phrase, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; he can see it only through witnesses, and is as dependent on their eyes and emotions as on their pens. This is not to say that he must share their bias; quite the contrary. But he must understand it in order to allow for it, and he may not have the wherewithal for understanding. In the example cited he should have little trouble in identifying one writer as an aristocrat, the other as a radical; trouble comes in trying to determine how much and in what ways the event has been distorted by passing through the personalities of the observers. This question has no general answer. Every historian must decide it for himself, and no two will reach precisely the same conclusion.

The subjectivity of evidence is matched by the subjectivity of the historian himself. A classic instance is the history of the Reformation, which is one thing in the hands of a Roman Catholic, another in those of a Calvinist, and a third in those of a free-thinking rationalist. The historian is attempting to bring the past to life, first for himself and then for his readers, and must try to imagine himself in the position of a participant in whatever events he is describing; an informed imagination,

in fact, is his means of understanding. But it must be a disciplined imagination if he is to minimize his bias; otherwise he will identify himself with one individual or group to the exclusion of others, and write polemical and therefore bad history. One of the best known of contemporary Elizabethan scholars, for example, is convinced that the sum of political wisdom is to know when to compromise, and that the uncompromising are responsible for most of humanity's ills. He is entitled to this opinion as a citizen of the present, but not as an historian. When he carries it into his writing, and damns all extremists as knaves, his prejudice impairs the value of his enormous research.

The line between bias that must be accepted as inherent and inevitable and bias that is unprofessional and unacceptable is extremely difficult to draw. It is also extremely important, because nothing more closely concerns the historian's attitude toward change. *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis*: the historian is attempting to journey backward in time, and to undo the change that has taken place between the period in which he lives and that in which he works. He cannot succeed completely, and is bound to carry with him some bias, his own and that of his society, to color his opinion of the past. It may be argued that his discipline lays two obligations upon him. One is to put aside as far as possible, when he engages the world of the past, the prejudices formed in his contemporary world. The other is to make his readers as independent as possible of the prejudices that he retains. The first obligation means that he must enter imaginatively into historical personalities whose motives and ways of thought are alien or even antipathetic to him, and see them in the context of their time. The second means that he must give his readers as full a context as he can, and thereby give them the liberty to judge for themselves. The Elizabethan scholar just mentioned argues in effect that fanatics are evil in the twentieth century, and were therefore evil in the sixteenth. This is more than a *non sequitur*; it shows a failure to understand the character of Tudor fanatics, Catholic and Protestant, and to explain the context of embattled faiths out of which their fanaticism came. Because we have changed with the times, the past is not amenable to judgment by the standards of the present.

The historian, however, has to assume some degree of continuity and even identity between past and present. If the 16th century had nothing in common with his own times, he could

say nothing significant about it—and Shakespeare and Marlowe would have nothing to say to him. He must accept the working premise that certain essential elements in the human situation are universal and do not change with time, however much their form may change. Economic pressures operated before there was a science of economics; sea power influenced history before Mahan attempted to codify its influence; most important of all, human behavior followed psychological patterns before psychology was dreamed of. Although man improves his technological skill, alters his social structure, and increases his awareness of himself and his environment, the kinds of forces that work upon him and in him remain constant over vast periods.

Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman  
At yonder heaving hill would stare:  
The blood that warms an English yeoman,  
The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.  
(A. E. Housman, *On Wenlock Edge*.)

The historian, although he can no more prove this statement than the poet could have, accepts it as consonant with his data and in fact axiomatic. But the axiom that there are unchanging elements creates a particular problem. If economic pressures, for instance, operated when there was no economist to observe them, the surviving record of their operation is bound to be extraordinarily hard to read, because the recorders were unconscious of what to us are economic realities. The process of inflation, to take a concrete case, appeared to them as nothing more than greed in action; and their furious moral strictures scarcely illuminate the issue. Forces working below the conscious level are almost of necessity impossible to document, yet they are often the most important causes of change. The historian may be convinced of their existence, even though he does not begin to have the evidence that the canons of his discipline require. He then has the choice of saying nothing or of making an assertion based on little more than hunch; and neither alternative is satisfying.

The difficulties created by incomplete and biased evidence are of course not peculiar to history. Any social scientist seeking his data in the past faces similar difficulties, though rarely in the same abundance and to the same degree because he is not looking for the complete context. The anthropologist has great gaps in his information about prehistoric man, but he need not worry

about the personalities of those who made his artifacts. The demographer who lacks reliable statistics for measuring population changes can at least ignore the politics of the census-takers. The lawyer frequently deals with inadequate evidence about past events, refracted through the bias of litigants and witnesses if not through his own; yet he has the advantage over the historian that he is probing the past for a highly specialized purpose, and that the testimony constituting his data has been elicited by expert questioning instead of being jotted down by witnesses at their own sweet will. The clinical psychologist must often draw from his patients the details that they most wish to conceal, and hence that are most subject to distortion; but he, like the lawyer, is probing for a specific purpose, and he can re-examine his witnesses as often as need be. The historian alone is attempting to reconstruct a portion of the past in its full complexity, out of haphazard and conflicting testimony of witnesses immune to questioning. The portion that he selects has limits that are largely of his own choosing, but within them he studies the process of change in all its aspects, as most social scientists do not. His assignment is so large and his data so unreliable that his conclusions always have in them an element of the conjectural.

### *The Search for a Pattern of Change*

In considering change the historian is conditioned, like any one else, by the intellectual climate of his day. A major conditioning factor in the last hundred years has been the assumption that the process of historic change is *ipso facto* progress, development from worse to better. This assumption is in essence an attempt to impose meaning upon change, and it is a meaning that is not easy for the historian to accept. It runs counter to his empathic engagement with the past; the more he imagines himself into the world that he is studying, the less he is concerned with whether it was better or worse than the world in which he lives, and the more skeptical he becomes of qualitative comparisons. Yet he is also a creature of his present society. If it assumes progress, so to some extent does he, with the result that he is in tension between his two worlds.

The modern idea of progress was born of the Victorian marriage, perhaps a *mésalliance*, between liberal optimism and the Darwinian concept of evolution. In an era when the human

race seemed to be advancing toward utopia, progress seemed to be self-evident. Many historians accepted it, at the cost of their professional insight, and came to regard the past as if it had justified itself merely by leading to the present.

This concept of change as evolution from worse to better rests upon faith. It cannot be deduced from history in any way that is logically satisfying. In some areas, such as the pure and applied sciences, change has a cumulative character; each generation builds upon the achievements of its predecessors in a way that increases man's knowledge, and with it his ability to control his physical and even social environment. But how does he use this ability, and is the result necessarily evolution from worse to better? Worse for whom and better for whom? Better in what sense, greater human creativity, longevity, or just flabbiness? In the area of politics a usual criterion of progress is the increase in individual rights, but here again the historian is hard put to it to demonstrate that freedom grows only by a cumulative process, or that its growth is necessarily for the better. In the area of art, conceived in its widest terms, the cumulative process is not apparent except over relatively brief periods of time, and change from worse to better cannot be demonstrated at all. In architecture, for instance, the designers of Chartres owed nothing to Iktinos and the Parthenon, and the greatness of the two structures is incommensurable. In religion, what medieval or modern writer speaks more profoundly than the unknown prophet called Second Isaiah? Shakespeare is not better or worse than Aeschylus, Rembrandt than Michelangelo, Beethoven than Bach; merely to suggest a qualitative comparison exposes the absurdity of the idea. Although transcendent achievement in art may speak differently to different generations, and their awareness of it may alter and deepen, the achievement itself remains independent of time.

The concept of change as progress is of extremely limited value in studying the past. The historian cannot entirely avoid the concept because he is part of his times, but the more he lets it color his attitude the more biased his history becomes. The essential concern of his discipline is with the question of how and why change occurred, and with nothing else. The quite different question of whether change was an improvement is in most cases neither relevant nor answerable.

The how and why of change involve a variety of methodological problems. Some of them, even if they are not soluble, are

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relatively simple in nature; and the simplest of all is the problem of amassing data. Suppose, for example, that the historian is exploring the question of why the British lost the War of American Independence. His first task is to collect all the information he can about what happened on both sides of the Atlantic during the war. Eventually he must decide that he has reached the point of diminishing returns where he should stop his search. What justifies his stopping? Nothing in logic, because the possibilities of relevant new material in another library, another government archive, another private muniment room stretch before him endlessly. Time does not; at some moment he must arbitrarily call a halt in order to get on with the job. If he stops too soon, he ruins the rest of his work; if he stops too late, he squanders on collecting trivia the energy that could far better have been used on the core of his problem. All he can do is guess, on the basis of experience, when he has reached the point where further research would not produce significant results.

Organizing the data is methodologically no more complicated than collecting it, and his description begins to take form. Certain parts of it are inadequate, certain episodes obscure, because he lacks the material to clarify them and does not know where to find it; these shortcomings he expects and must accept. But something quite different grows on him with the emerging descriptive pattern: a wonder about why the pattern has that particular form. Chronicling the way in which the war developed, in other words, raises the question of why it turned out as it did.

If there ever was a struggle that seems to defy the notion of historic determinism, the War of Independence was it. For the first three years, until 1778, Great Britain apparently had an enormous preponderance of strength. Her navy commanded the sea; her troops, British and Hessian, were at least equal to the best in the American army and at critical moments were more numerous; her government was no more torn by faction than the Continental Congress; her economic resources were infinitely superior to those of the colonies. After the entrance of France in 1778, Britain managed to hold her own for three years in all the theatres of a global war. At the beginning, in summary, the cards seemed to be heavily stacked in her favor; and until the Yorktown campaign she had no clear strategic inferiority. Why, then, did the outcome run counter to the apparent probabilities?

The question opens a mare's nest of problems, and they are different in kind from those of gathering and organizing the evidence. If the historian brushes them aside and contents himself with mere description, he is evading the real challenge of his subject. If, on the other hand, he attempts to answer the question, he knows that he can never fully succeed. The traditional patriotic answer, compounded of the Spirit of '76 and the generalship of George Washington, he recognizes as pure myth; in the New York campaign of 1776 those two ingredients came within an ace of losing the war for the Americans. An answer that may tempt him is that the British were strategically stupider than their opponents, as witness Saratoga and Yorktown. But how about Long Island, the Brandywine, and Charleston, or the French failures in 1778 and 1779? So it goes: for every argument he can find a counter-argument, and the final answer always eludes him.

Yet in the process of evolving explanations, discarding some and modifying others, he is enlarging his conception of the problem. He is coming to see the interrelation of apparently disparate factors and apparently unconnected events; new lines of inquiry are opening to him, for which he probably has to gather additional data. He may find that he needs the help of other disciplines—economics, for instance, in order to weigh the effects of the British blockade on the American economy and of American privateering on the British; or psychology, to probe the supineness of Howe, the treason of Arnold, the insubordination of Cornwallis. As he explores more and more aspects of his subject, his understanding of it broadens and deepens; as he brings data of different kind within the framework of his theoretical construction, it grows increasingly complex. He never reaches his goal, a definitive explanation of the outcome of the war. But the more nearly he approaches it, as in all theory-building, the more adequate his explanation becomes.

### *The Paradox in Historical Theory*

The attempt to explain is not something extra, an intellectual icing on the cake of historical fact. History that is a mere stringing together of events is essentially meaningless, because sequential events acquire meaning only when some sort of pattern is imposed upon them. Time in itself is a dimension, not a pattern; a sequence that is no more than temporal is a tale told by an idiot. Historical research, like any other form of curiosity, is a quest for meaning; and the historian is therefore

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by necessity a pattern-maker. When he begins his research he may have no clear pattern in mind. But at least he has set tentatively the limits of his subject, and at most he has a theory—tentative again—of why events turned out as they did. The limits alter as his investigation progresses, and the theory is likely to be amended beyond recognition. The outcome is a theory, explanation, or pattern (the three in this context are synonymous) that covers to his satisfaction the events he has been studying.

But his satisfaction is never complete. If he is honest with himself, he cannot wholly believe in the adequacy of his pattern, because he knows not only that it is based on incomplete and biased data, but also that it is at best a mere approximation to reality. The simpler it is, the less its historical accuracy; the more complex it is, the less meaning it conveys. Hence any writer of history, and even more any teacher, must take some liberty with the intricacies of his subject in order to explain it, and yet cannot take too much without destroying its essence. A lecturer at Yale once held his students spellbound for an hour while he described the great *philosophes* of the 18th century, and wrapped each in a verbal package that was as memorable as it was neat. "A brilliant performance," commented one of his colleagues who was a specialist in the field, "perhaps the most brilliant lecture I've ever heard given to undergraduates. My one minor criticism is that there wasn't a word of truth in it." The praise and the qualification were equally well grounded.

There is thus a paradox at the heart of the historical discipline. Events in themselves are meaningless, and at the same time no pattern of meaning can be imposed upon them without to some extent oversimplifying and distorting their complexity. The historian is therefore both a pattern-maker and a distruster of patterns. He is dealing not, as social scientists are, with aspects of human experience that are limited and isolated by the disciplines themselves, but with the whole gamut of man's life in the past. Although he demarcates his area in time or space or both, the demarcation is his own choice rather than inherent in his discipline. Within the area that he chooses everything is relevant and anything may be important. But he will never know more than a fraction of what he needs to know for a final judgment, and even that fraction will have suffered a sea of change in emerging out of the past into his present. His data

are no more than reflections of what was, and his conclusions from them are and must always be tentative.

If this is the nature of history, what sort of discipline is it? Clearly it is not a social science in the usual sense, because it is not focused upon generalizing from similar or repetitive phenomena. Although it offers its practitioners a vast collection of experiments in change, and challenges them to draw whatever generalizations they can, it also trains them to distrust the generalizations that they draw. Hence it rarely provides conclusions that have tangible application to the present; any statement beginning with "history teaches us that" is almost sure to be un-historical. A student who immerses himself in a past problem, for example the long tragedy of Anglo-Irish relations, is unlikely to be able to isolate its ingredients, let alone to generalize in any way that is valid for comparable situations—for the Hindu-Moslem struggle in India, which was also resolved by partition, or for the current crisis in Algeria, where the role of the *colons* is strikingly similar to that of Ulster in 1912-14. Historical analogies are as brittle as they are provocative, and they cannot be pushed far without breaking in the hand.

Yet the discipline is much more than a frustrating effort to satisfy curiosity about the past. Its value for contemporary society is real if indirect; it provides no reliable basis for extrapolating the process of future change, but it can reveal, however imprecisely, the forces of change that are moulding the present. And for the individual it can do much more. Wrestling with the Irish problem brings a new understanding of how tragedy perpetuates itself, of how the memory of violence breeds new violence, of why both parties to a struggle may be palpably in the right. These are not scientific findings, or the mere products of a satisfied curiosity; they are at bottom attributes of mind. Historical inquiry, like any emphatic engagement with human beings in their full complexity, has for its main result not theory but a deepened awareness. The inadequacy of the historian's data keeps his imagination constantly at the stretch, and just as constantly schools him in humility. No matter how narrow his field, within it he is reaching for the totality of experience; and the reach inevitably exceeds the grasp. Push his research and refine his techniques as he will, the fact remains that he is dealing with a mystery.

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### 3. Causation and the American Civil War: Two Appraisals\*

I. LEE BENSON

"And then . . . and then . . ."

In his *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster observes that "what the story does is to narrate the life in time." Beginning with primitive man, storytellers have held their audiences by making them want to know what happens next. Something happens. "And then?" Something else happens. "And then?" So it goes until they end the story.<sup>1</sup>

Although historians also use the narrative device, "and then," to tell what happened to men over time, they aim to do more than tell a story or present a chronicle of events. For a history and a chronicle differ in essentially the same manner that a plot and a story differ in the novel. To quote Forster:

Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it . . . Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say "and then?" If it is in a plot we ask "why?" That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel.<sup>2</sup>

Using Forster's criterion, we can define a historian as a plot-teller. Unlike the chronicler, the historian tries to solve the

\* Reprinted with permission from *History and Theory*, I (1961, no. 2), 163-185.

<sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, 1954), 25-42.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

mystery of *why* human events occurred in a particular time-sequence. His ultimate goal is to uncover and illuminate the motives of human beings acting in particular situations, and, thus, help men to understand themselves. A historical account, therefore, necessarily takes this form: "Something happened and then something else happened *because* . . ." Put another way, the historian's job is to explain human behavior over time.

### *1. General Laws of Causal Dependence*

To do his job successfully, the historian has to assume the existence of general laws of causal dependence. That is, he has to adhere to certain logical principles (or laws) which, I suggest, govern any explanation of human behavior, whether the attempt finds expression in a poem, a novel, or a historical monograph. Suppose we were to concede that Aristotle is right and that poetry is more philosophic and of graver import than history. Nevertheless, the proposition asserted here holds that poets, novelists, and historians must adhere to essentially the same principles to achieve plausibility—although they may not know that they are doing it. Perhaps this point is best made by analyzing Forster's plot: "The king died, and then the queen died of grief."

If we read a novel built around that plot, what logical principles would we invoke before we accepted its causal inference?

The first logical principle that governs causal explanations is associated with the time-sequence of events. The alleged causal event must actually occur and it must precede the effect; in Forster's plot, the king must die before the queen. An elementary principle, of course. So elementary, in fact, that to cite it is to invite the charge of stating the obvious. And yet, despite its elementary character, perhaps because of it, that principle is sometimes ignored in historical explanations.

The second explanatory principle is an extension of the first. For us to accept Forster's plot, the king must not only die before the queen, the queen must know of the king's death. If the queen could not have known, or did not actually know, we would reject the "grief-stricken" explanation, even though it satisfied the time-sequence requirement. Stated more generally, the second principle asserts that human beings must be aware—consciously or unconsciously—of antecedent events that allegedly produce certain effects upon them. True, if the queen were

killed instantaneously by a falling gargoyle while she was walking around the castle walls, we might accept an explanation that "she did not know what hit her." But, obviously, that is not the kind of cause-effect sequence Forster was describing.

It is equally obvious that this principle does not require us to assume that men are aware of all the "historical forces" that affect them, directly and indirectly. Suppose the king had died in the Crusades. We might regard Forster's plot as plausible if he showed that the queen knew the king had died; he would not have to show, for example, that the event could be traced to the Moslems' loss of control of the Western Mediterranean. Suppose, however, that the plot centered on the idea that changes in control of the Mediterranean were ultimately responsible for the queen's death. To achieve even minimal plausibility, Forster would still have to show that the queen knew, or believed, that the king had died while on Crusade. If he failed to do so, his plot would be incredible, even if his historical scholarship were impeccable. I am suggesting here that we cannot treat so-called historical forces as though they were things in themselves, in some metaphysical way, independent of men's awareness. Men may not control their destinies, but "historical forces" can only operate through men who act on the *belief* that certain events have occurred, or will occur, or are more or less likely to occur. (For our present purposes, it is immaterial whether men's beliefs correspond to reality.)

Granted that Forster's explanation of death from grief passes the first two tests, we would then test it further by invoking general laws of human behavior. Despite its scientific ring, the term "general laws of human behavior" should not raise the tempers of humanistically-oriented scholars, nor raise the ghost of Henry Adams, who was convinced that the second law of thermodynamics could function as the first law of history. Aristotle, it will be recalled, ranked poetry above history on the ground that poetry is concerned with universal and pervasive phenomena; in other words, the art of poetry expresses, and bases itself upon, general laws of human behavior. Similarly, when Forster devised a plot based on the queen's dying of grief, it was predicated on the assumption that men believe human beings can die of grief. In short, when authors create plots that ring true, they are satisfying what we regard as general laws of human behavior.

The fourth and final explanatory principle is an extension of

the third. To be convincing, a novel built around Forster's plot must not only pass the tests associated with time sequence, actors' awareness of antecedent events, and *general* laws of human behavior, it must satisfy us in respect to the *uniqueness* of the characters, relationships, and circumstances it has depicted. From all that the author has told us, we must feel that the plot, characters, relationships, and circumstances, are not only generally credible, but that they ring true in this particular novel.<sup>3</sup>

Since my discussion of the complex problems involved in the analysis of historical inquiry is designed to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, this essay makes no attempt to identify all relevant explanatory principles, nor to discuss any one in detail. But a concrete illustration may help to support the contention that historical, like literary, work must conform to the principles cited above.

Fortunately for our purposes, the most celebrated hypothesis in American historiography affords direct parallels with the plot Forster sketched. Forster said: "The king died, and then the queen died of grief." Frederick Jackson Turner said: "The frontier ended in 1890, and then American society experienced a series of fundamental shocks and changes." To quote, not paraphrase, what Turner wrote in 1893: "And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."<sup>4</sup> And, in 1896—by then prepared to state his hypothesis more explicitly—he wrote that the rise of the Populist movement was due to the death of the frontier and the end of "free land":

In the remoter West, the restless, rushing wave of settlement has broken with a shock against the arid plains. The free lands are gone, the continent is crossed, and all this push and energy is turn-

<sup>3</sup> In effect, Forster invoked the fourth principle while hailing George Meredith as "the finest contriver" ever produced by English fiction. "A Meredithian plot is not a temple to the tragic or even to the comic Muse, but rather resembles a series of kiosks most artfully placed among wooded slopes, which his people reach by their own impetus, and from which they emerge with altered aspect. Incident springs out of character, and having occurred, it alters that character. People and events are closely connected, and he does it by means of these contrivances. They are often delightful, sometimes touching, always unexpected. This shock, followed by the feeling, 'Oh, that's all right', is a sign that all is well with the plot . . ." *Ibid.*, 90-91.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1950), 38.

ing into channels of agitation . . . now the frontier opportunities are gone. Discontent is demanding an extension of governmental activity in its behalf.<sup>5</sup>

I need not belabor the point that the Turner hypothesis has powerfully shaped American historiography. The hypothesis breaks down, however, when we invoke the first, elementary explanatory principle. Just as the king had to die if the queen was subsequently to die of grief, the "free lands" had to disappear if the Turner hypothesis was to be credible. Failure to invoke that elementary principle, I suggest, has burdened American historiography with a hypothesis based on a demonstrable error. It is not necessary here to assemble the data which show that "free land" had not disappeared by 1890, 1896, or 1900. An authoritative recent study, whose dedication paid homage to "the traditions of Frederick Jackson Turner," acknowledged that the "economic impact of the passing of the frontier was comparatively slight, largely because the westward movement continued after 1890 as before. Good land still waited newcomers in the West, for despite the pronouncement of the Census Bureau [that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line' in 1890], only a thin film of population covered that vast territory."<sup>6</sup>

The example of the frontier hypothesis has been cited to illustrate the general proposition that the same logical principles govern causal explanations of human behavior, whether they are advanced by historians or by novelists. Having sketched some of these principles, I shall now be concerned with discussing one major difficulty that arises when historians attempt to put them into practice.

Though historians and novelists must adhere to the same logical principles, a crucial difference exists between the kinds of explanations they are likely to offer. Since novelists frequently

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 219-220.

<sup>6</sup> Ray A. Billington, *Westward Expansion* (New York, 1950), 749. Conceivably, one might rescue the frontier hypothesis by invoking the principle that truth in history is not only what actually happened, but what people believe to have happened. In this case, however, the rescue operation cannot succeed. In a study that has not yet been published, I have shown that, during the 1890's no significant segment of the American people were even aware that the frontier was supposed to have passed into history. Actually, the Populist Revolt came and went before Turner's erroneous assertions trickled down to the public by way of historians who did not subject them to adequate logical and empirical tests.

build their plots around an individual, or around a relatively small number of individuals, they may conceivably present single-factor explanations of behavior. But historians deal with the complex interactions of relatively large numbers of individuals and groups, and, therefore, always face the difficult task of assessing the relative importance of more than one factor. In short, historians can neither resort to monistic explanations of specific events, nor substitute eclecticism for monism.

Because it contradicts our experience, an eclectic, unweighted list of "causes" fails to satisfy our need to know why an event followed some prior event. Ignoring the philosophical question of free will, we cannot deny that man has greater capacity than other forms of matter to choose between alternative goals and between alternative ways of attaining specific goals. Life plainly demonstrates to us, however, that men are subject to many influences and that, on occasion, some determine their choices or action more than others. Everyday speech reflects our intuitive attempts to rank causes in some order of significance. We freely talk of "the most important cause," "the major factor," "a significant reason," "an unimportant consideration." Thus, even if impelled by no other consideration than personal experience, historians who try to reconstruct and explain the real-life complexity of human affairs must try to give relative weight to causal factors. An excellent example is provided by one of the classics of historiography, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

## 2. *The Example of Thucydides*

Like his predecessor, Herodotus, Thucydides wrote about a great war. But, according to Francis Godolphin, they differed radically in their conception of historiography: "For Thucydides, above all, causes exist inside the human sphere, and it is the historian's business to find them and relate them to events. He rejects absolutely the external causation of Herodotus. He clearly objects to Herodotus' use of the single principle and the general hypothesis to explain particular events. The naiveté of the myths in Herodotus is likewise unworthy of history. For Thucydides a plurality of causes related to problems of economic wants and political power must replace the Herodotean Nemesis . . . The irrational does exist for Thucydides . . . and he shows the profound effect it may have on established patterns, but it is chance only in the sense of the contingent or accidental, never

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the abstract power, Fortune or Providence, later deified by the Romans." <sup>7</sup>

As Thucydides' introduction demonstrates, however, he did not regard a plurality of causes as synonymous with an unweighted list of causes.

War began when the Athenians and the Peloponnesians broke the Thirty Years Truce which had been made after the capture of Euboea. As to reasons why they broke the truce, I propose first to give an account of the causes of complaint which they had against each other and of the specific instances where their interests clashed; this is in order that there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about what led to this great war falling upon the Hellenes. But *the real reason for the war* [italics added] is, in my opinion, most likely to be disguised by such an argument. What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta. As for the reasons for breaking the truce and declaring war which were openly expressed by each side, they are as follows.<sup>8</sup>

And then he traced in detail the sequence of events that culminated in the declaration of war by Sparta and her allies against Athens and her allies.

Thucydides took the end of the Persian War as the starting point of his narrative. Structurally, Book One is built around three closely related themes: the state of public opinion over time and in different places; the processes whereby public opinion was formed; and the impact of public opinion upon events.<sup>9</sup> With skill and economy, he traced the increasing tensions between the Athenian and Spartan coalitions; and, in building his narrative to its war climax, he distinguished between the "real" causes of conflict and superficial "pretexts." He differentiated between immediate and underlying causes, and made unequivocal judgments about the "chief reasons," or "chief reason," for specific decisions and actions.

Thucydides' practice of assigning relative weight to causal

<sup>7</sup> Francis R. B. Godolphin, *The Greek Historians* (New York, 1942), xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>8</sup> I, 25. The translation used here is that by Rex Warner (Penguin Book ed., Great Britain, 1956).

<sup>9</sup> My discussion refers only to the account in Book I, 13-96. Not being a specialist in the field, I do not presume to offer an account of Thucydides' concept of causation as such. His work is drawn on solely for illustrative purposes.

factors shows up most clearly in a passage describing the climactic meeting of the Spartan Assembly. At this meeting, leading Spartans, as well as delegates from Sparta's allies and from Athens, presented arguments for and against a declaration of war. Finally, the question was put to the Assembly by a Spartan leader: "'Spartans, those of you who think that the treaty has been broken and that the Athenians are aggressors, get up and stand on one side. Those who do not think so, stand on the other side,' and he pointed out to them where they were to stand. They then rose to their feet and separated into two divisions. The great majority were of the opinion that the treaty had been broken." [I, 61]

But a number of different arguments had been presented to the Assembly in favor of a declaration of war. Appeals had been made to the Spartans to honor their treaty obligations, to redress their allies' wrongs, to rebuke the arrogant Athenians, and to protect their own interests. Which arguments controlled the action of the "great majority," and to what degree? What accounted for the persuasive force of those arguments? Here is Thucydides' summary statement of the considerations determining public opinion in Sparta on the issue of war or peace.

The Spartans voted that the treaty had been broken and that war should be declared, not so much because they were influenced by the speeches of their allies as because they were afraid of the further growth of Athenian power, seeing, as they did, that already the greater part of Hellas was under the control of Athens. [I, 62]

As the quotation suggests, Thucydides' treatment of causation rejects both the oversimplifications of monism and the indecisions of eclecticism. In essential respects, his book is written much as men talk in daily discourse and think in real life. And, like men in real life, he concluded that decisions were made and actions were taken "partly" because of one reason but "chiefly" for another. (The validity of his particular interpretation, of course, is irrelevant to my argument.)

Thucydides has been cited here as a classic representative of historians whose work rests upon three propositions: 1) causation is present in human affairs; 2) it therefore cannot be avoided in accounts which purport to tell what human beings did; 3) like other students of men in society, historians who attempt to explain the occurrence of events must make judgments concerning the relevance and significance of different causal factors.

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Though these propositions have been acted upon since Thucydides' time, they involve difficulties which, in my opinion, historians have scarcely begun to attack systematically, much less resolve.<sup>10</sup> It is true that in everyday speech we do not hesitate to make the claims conveyed by expressions such as, "the chief reasons," "partly because," "mostly because." When we use them, we undoubtedly have some more or less definite idea in mind, and, succeed in communicating that idea to others. But it is extremely difficult to employ such terms in connection with specific historical events. When historians attempt to appraise the relative significance of causal factors, at least four questions arise:

What do historians intend to convey when they assert that one factor was the "main" or "principal" cause of an event such as the Peloponnesian War or the American Civil War, and another factor was of "minor" or "limited" significance? What data do they offer to support their assignment of relative weight? What procedures do they use to obtain the data? On what grounds can estimates be made of the degree in which data support a conclusion *when judgments conflict* about the relative importance of different factors?

These questions bring us to the core of historical inquiry, and the difficulties they involve may explain the sparseness of the theoretical literature which attempts to answer them concretely.<sup>11</sup> Confronted by this problem, and unable to wait for a theory, historians have had to proceed as though they already knew the answers to the questions. Such a practical approach seems both defensible and desirable. Yet it also seems desirable that historians attempt to advance beyond the practical by attacking some general problems of historical causation while dealing with specific events.

<sup>10</sup> "When as students of history we approach the subject of 'causation,' we find ourselves in difficulties, for the problem is not one that has received sustained consideration. In accounting for historical events, every historian has been a law to himself." Frederick J. Teggart, "Causation in Historical Events," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 3-11.

<sup>11</sup> See the penetrating essay by Ernest Nagel, "The Logic of Historical Analysis," *The Scientific Monthly*, LXXIV (1952), 162-69, reprinted in several anthologies. As recently as 1957, Professor Nagel expressed the view that, although "philosophic students of historical method have written much on problems of historical causation, in my opinion, the extant literature is on such a high level of generality that the conclusions reached do not effectively illuminate the logic of historical inquiry." Letter from Ernest Nagel to Charles Y. Glock, March 26, 1957, cited with the writer's permission.

### 3. Causes of the American Civil War

A substantive example may again serve to focus the discussion. In this case, it is provided by the historical literature relevant to the coming of a war, rather than one historian's explanation of a war.

The number of studies touching upon the causes of the American Civil War has already reached awesome proportions. The number of different explanations advanced is not as large but is almost as awesome.<sup>12</sup> Yet a reasonably comprehensive survey of the literature<sup>13</sup> indicated that the structure of these explanations is strikingly similar to that found in Thucydides. Like him, historians of the Civil War build their narratives around three themes: the state of public opinion over time and in different places; the processes whereby public opinion was formed; and the impact of public opinion upon events. Again, like him, they trace the rising tension between rival coalitions and the interaction between public opinion and events. In most accounts, the rivals are grouped into two major coalitions, North and South; but in a few, the West (or Northwest) is designated as a third.

Each historian whose work was examined employed some variant of the "and then" formula. Each selected some more or less specific date when tensions were low as the chronological starting point. Either the account was given in straight chronological order, i.e., beginning with the starting point and marching to the war climax; or a version of the "flashback" was used, i.e., beginning with the war, back to the starting point, and once again arriving at the war climax. The starting points differed widely but the narrative framework was essentially the same.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See the excellent analyses by Howard K. Beale, "What Historians Have Said About the Causes of the Civil War," in Social Science Research Council, *Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography* (New York, 1946), 55-102; and Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War* (Princeton, 1954).

<sup>13</sup> This survey was partially reported in Lee Benson and Thomas J. Pressly, *Can Differences in Interpretations of the Causes of the American Civil War be Resolved Objectively?* (Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, 1956, mimeographed.)

<sup>14</sup> Of course, works focused entirely on the secession crisis did not follow this pattern. Nevertheless, even those works made implicit assumptions about the factors bringing tension to a high point from some prior date when relative calm prevailed.

According to some historians, different and clashing economic systems constituted the major source of conflict between the rival coalitions. Other historians found conflicts between different "cultures" to be the chief cause of tension. Still others stressed antagonisms stemming from divergent political theories and moral codes. In short, historians disagree about which groups were responsible for the rising tension, or about the issues over which groups fought, or about both. But in each account the outcome is the same. Opinions crystallize and significant segments of the population living in the rival areas become increasingly antagonistic until the war climax is reached. With rough accuracy, this is the structure of the works examined which touched upon causation in the Civil War.

A crucial difference exists, however, between Thucydides' explanation of the Peloponnesian War and those offered by historians of the Civil War. Possibly because he was concerned with small homogeneous city-states, some of them governed by direct democracy, Thucydides drew little distinction between elite groups and masses in tracing the events leading to war. Though he indicated that leaders influenced the masses, he ascribed their influence to the force or clarity of their arguments in public debate and to their record of accomplishment, not to their authority of office, disproportionate command of material resources, or conspiratorial skill. Discussing the Athenian answer to the Spartan ultimatum, for example, he noted that Pericles had suggested the answer in his speech to the Assembly. "The Athenians considered that his advice was best and voted as he had asked them to vote." [I, 96]. Thucydides did not argue that, prior to the outbreak of the war, members of the public on either side were lashed into frenzy by trusted leaders or skilled agitators who induced them to act irrationally. The Spartan decision for war was presented as the rational, inevitable reaction of thinking citizens to the developments affecting their collective interests. Neither the formation of public opinion, nor its impact upon decisions or events, was described as controlled by small elite groups seeking private or concealed objectives. In his account, the masses were not only theoretically sovereign, they appear to have effectively exercised their sovereignty.

Unlike Thucydides, historians of the Civil War deal with large political units whose form of government was *representative*, rather than *direct*, democracy. It is understandable, therefore, that with few exceptions, the historians whose works were

examined tended to emphasize the disproportionate ability of certain men (or groups) to influence and control governmental decisions and actions. Some accounts made only rough distinctions between leaders and followers; other accounts established more precise categories. Whatever the system of classification, significant distinctions were made between men, both in respect to their decision-making power and in respect to their ability to shape public opinion. Thus in all works examined, public opinion was held to be a significant cause of events. But it was not viewed as the only determinant of government legislation or policy, not even by historians most inclined to invest the masses with sovereign power; it was recognized that certain men possessed disproportionate power to shape public opinion along lines most favorable to their convictions, interests, or prejudices.

Compared to Thucydides, Civil War historians clearly face a more complicated task when they try to determine the relative importance of causal factors. They must assess the relative power of "elite groups" and masses in the decision-making process. (Here the term "elite groups" refers to political, economic, and cultural leaders on all social levels.) And they must assess the role played by members of elite groups in the formation of public opinion prior to the acts of secession in the Southern states; they cannot assume that the evolution of public opinion was the rational, inevitable, reaction of informed citizens to developments affecting their collective interests.

But the task of Civil War historians is identical with Thucydides' in respect to one aspect of the causation problem. Just as he had to determine the proportion of Spartans who favored declaring war on Athens, Civil War historians must determine, for example, the proportion of Northerners who favored legislation to halt further geographic expansion of slavery. And just as Thucydides had to determine the extent to which the Spartans' decision for war was influenced either by fear of growing Athenian power or by pressure from their allies, Civil War historians must estimate the extent to which Northerners' opinions on the expansion of slavery were influenced by economic, political, moral, or other objectives. In more general terms, Civil War historians, like Thucydides, must make judgments concerning the state of public opinion on specific issues at a given time and place, and they must assign relative importance to the different "reasons" (motives, considerations) that led men to arrive at certain opinions. In my view, an attack upon this aspect

of the public-opinion problem is not only the most effective way to *begin* an attack upon the overall problem of Civil War causation, but it may help us eventually to attack some general problems of historical causation. A summary and expansion of the discussion may justify these conclusions.

#### 4. *Public Opinion as a Cause of the Civil War*

The survey of Civil War studies offering causal explanations found that all treated certain factors as more important than others, explicitly or implicitly. Though every historian treated public opinion as a significant determinant of events ultimately resulting in the war, there was considerable difference in the emphasis placed upon it. Moreover, historians presented widely different estimates of public interest in certain issues, and they presented widely different—sometimes directly contradictory—descriptions of the state of public opinion on the *same* issue.

For example, historians made different or contradictory assertions about the extent, intensity, and motivation of popular support for, or opposition to, adoption of such policies as the abolition of slavery, limitation of the territory legally open to it, re-opening of the African slave trade. Depending upon the specific assertions made, public opinion on certain issues was held to be a more or less significant determinant of decisions or actions taken by individuals, organized groups, and government agencies. In turn, those events (decisions and actions) were said to have brought about changes in the state of public opinion, which then led to still other events that ultimately resulted in the Civil War. Thus, although all historians viewed the interaction between public opinion and events as occurring in a specific, causally related sequence whose terminal point was the outbreak of war, the specific sequences they described differed widely.

If the analysis is correct, the following conclusion seems justified: Verifying claims concerning popular support for, or opposition to, certain government actions is a crucial, preliminary step in the verification of historical explanations that emphasize the impact of public opinion upon events. No causal relationship *necessarily* exists between the state of public opinion and the occurrence of a particular event, or set of events. If a historian asserts that such a relationship exists, it seems reasonable, therefore, to ask him to justify his description of public opinion before appraising his argument about its impact upon events. In

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other words, it would be logical to appraise the data and procedures used to *ascertain* public opinion on given issues before appraising the data and procedures used to *assess* its effect. To paraphrase Mrs. Glasse's celebrated advice on how to cook a hare, the recipe suggested here for assessing the role of public opinion as a cause of the Civil War begins, "First, catch your public opinion."

Thus, we come back to the first explanatory principle discussed in connection with Forster's plot and Turner's hypothesis. Brought to bear upon the Civil War, that principle requires historians to demonstrate the state of public opinion on specified issues before they assert that public opinion produced specified effects ultimately resulting in war and assign it relative weight as a causal factor. Unfortunately, at present, historians are poorly equipped to demonstrate the state of public opinion on any issue; adequate rules do not exist to help them to ascertain it.

As I see it, a critical weakness in American historiography becomes apparent when we recognize that the traditional rules of historical method were not devised by scholars dealing with mass behavior, and that these have not been amended in any systematic form by later scholars concerned with such phenomena. As a result, historians have few guide lines when they set out to assess the role of public opinion in a mass society. Lacking such guide lines, but forced to cope with the problem, historians have employed procedures of dubious validity to arrive at equally dubious conclusions.

For example, spurred on in recent decades by the popularity intellectual history has enjoyed, American scholars have relied heavily upon the assumption that writers serve as the antennae of the race. More specifically, they have assumed that the values, attitudes, and opinions they find expressed in certain books, or other works of art, accurately reflect the climate of opinion dominating a given time and place. This assumption rests on a still more basic one; namely, that the writer, or intellectual, accurately reflects public opinion because he powerfully shapes it. Are those assumptions warranted? At present, how do we know that specified writers serve as sensitive antennae at a particular time and place? Granted that poetic insights reveal truths obscure to less prescient men; when poets disagree, which poet (or poets) are we to select as our guide? How do we know that specified books had specified effects? How do we know which books changed which people's minds in what ways, where,

how, and why? In my opinion, at present we do not really know the answers to any one of those questions, but we have acted on the assumption that we know the answers to all of them. The result is that explanations of the Civil War rest upon extremely shaky foundations. One example, perhaps, makes the point.

No matter what else they disagree upon, Civil War historians agree that one book, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, reflected and shaped American public opinion and significantly influenced the course of events. True, Abraham Lincoln was disposed to speak of the Civil War as "Mrs. Stowe's War." I suggest, however, that despite such authority, no credible evidence now exists to substantiate the alleged influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Actually, scattered, impressionistic evidence indicates that historians have tended to exaggerate greatly the book's role as a reflection of, or influence upon, public opinion. More to the point, and more significantly, I do not know of any systematic attempt to study the book's influence. Ringing assertion has substituted for credible demonstration.

Stated in more general terms, my argument holds that no set of systematic propositions have yet been developed to define the relationships between literature and life, and that historians, therefore, cannot now use literature as a valid and reliable indicator of public opinion.

This view does not imply a nihilistic position on the relationships between literature and life. To say that historians have not yet systematically attempted to define those relationships, is not to say that they do not exist or that no possibility exists of establishing them. Further, the example of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has not been used as a blunt instrument to attack intellectual history. Quite the contrary. I think we need more, but better, intellectual history—and I think that we may get it, if we try to adapt to historical materials and problems certain theories, concepts, and methods developed in other disciplines (e.g., the theory of "reference group," the concept of "social role," the method of "content analysis.")

My main point, however, is that causal explanations require observance of certain logical principles. Even the most elementary principle, I have suggested, has been overlooked in explanations of the Civil War. That is, certain phenomena are alleged to have produced certain effects, but insufficient effort has been made to demonstrate that the phenomena actually occurred in the proper time sequence. We would not place credence

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in an explanation of the Civil War whose description of the state of public opinion was demonstrably erroneous; but, we would believe that, at least, a possibility existed of verifying an explanation whose description was accurate.

Whether historians will ever be able to verify estimates of the relative importance of public opinion (or any other factor) as a cause of an event can only be regarded as an open question at present. Conceivably, however, progress in historiography may eventually narrow the range of disagreement. That happy day would come about if certain explanations offered for an event could be eliminated on the ground that they made erroneous claims concerning the state of public opinion, and, therefore, violated the principle of causal dependence that holds that a causal factor alleged to exist must have preceded the alleged effect. In similar fashion, the other three general principles (actor's awareness, laws of human behavior, intrinsic plausibility) sketched at the outset could be invoked to narrow the range of potentially verifiable explanations of the American Civil War (or of any other "major event"). And narrowing the range of potentially verifiable explanations for the Civil War, I assume, would put us in a better position to assign relative weight to causal factors than the one we are in now.<sup>15</sup> It seems reasonable, therefore, to conclude with this observation: Historians of the Civil War might progress most directly and rapidly if they applied the general logic of historical inquiry to the systematic, explicit, and precise study of concrete events, and, in the process, deliberately attempted to develop more powerful conceptual and methodological tools with which to reconstruct the behavior of men in society over time.

## II. CUSHING STROUT

A specter haunts American historians—the concept of causality. After nearly a hundred years of passionate and dispassionate in-

<sup>15</sup> It is worth emphasizing that the ultimate verification of any particular explanation of the Civil War will imply the elimination of all other explanations. Cf.: "... verification involves not only confirmation but the exclusion or disproof of alternative hypotheses." Morris R. Cohen, "Causation and Its Application to History," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 12-29.

quiry into "the causes of the Civil War" the debate is still inconclusive. Even more discouraging, according to the editor of a recent anthology of historical writings on the problem, "twentieth-century historians often merely go back to interpretations advanced by partisans while the war was still in progress."<sup>1</sup> Despite the impasse, historians are not often discouraged. Some take refuge in professional patience or the firm confidence that their opponents have simply hardened their hearts to truth. Others are reconciled to skepticism by the historical relativism, defended by Carl Becker and Charles Beard, which characterizes all historical interpretations as determined products of a temporary, dominant "climate of opinion." A few, like Beard himself, have drastically tried to cut the knot by surgical removal of the causal category itself from history, though his own practice of economic determinism flatly contradicted this Draconian proposal. When the investigation of the answer to a question has led to such frustrating difficulties, it is necessary to re-examine the question, even if it leads the historian into philosophical territory where he naturally fears to tread.

Historians are often vulnerable to Henry Adams's charge that their causal assumptions, "hidden in the depths of dusty libraries, have been astounding, but commonly unconscious and childlike,"<sup>2</sup> yet they can find no real help from the eccentric results of his own search for a historical physics which would unify the course of events under one abstract formula, "a spool upon which to wind the thread of the past without breaking it."<sup>3</sup> For all his brilliance his speculative theory has quite rightly struck most historians as an exotic hybrid of history and science, spoiling the integrity of each. The "scientific school of history" ended either in fanciful speculation about historical laws or a naive cult of fact-finding as the essence of scientific method. If even the scientist, at the level of sub-atomic particles, must substitute statistical probability for causal universals, the historian has always been embarrassed by the effort to discover conditions which invariably produce certain results not otherwise accounted for. He cannot discriminate with exactness constants and variables by experimentation on a past forever gone, nor can he always confidently turn to social scientists for causal

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Causes of the Civil War* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1959), vi.

<sup>2</sup> *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York, 1931), 382.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 472.

rules when their findings, even when valid and relevant, are limited historically to particular times and places. Grateful as the historian may be for generalizations about, say, the voting behavior of Americans, he is ruefully aware that recurring evidence for the behavior of Americans in civil wars is fortunately not available.

The historian conventionally speaks of "multiple causes" because he knows he has no monistic formula to explain the course of history and no single generalization to cover all the necessary and sufficient conditions for a civil war. This fashion of speech is, however, misleading because he cannot escape his difficulties by multiplying them. If he does not believe that each of the many "causes" could have produced the Civil War by itself, then he must assume that the whole collection of them acted together as one in bringing about that effect. He is then left with the familiar problem of accounting for this causal relationship by reference to confirmed generalizations. What he cannot do for one "cause," he cannot do for a set of them acting as one.

Historians sometimes seek to avoid the problem of generalized causal rules by talking of a necessary chain of events.<sup>4</sup> Yet the events which are put into the so-called chains clearly have more determinants than are recognized by so placing them, and the same event can be put into a number of possible chains. The election of Lincoln, produced by a large number of small events, might well appear in two alleged chains of events which suggest quite different interpretations of the coming of the war. The chains are not, furthermore, really "necessary" unless their linkage is explained by theories or generalizations which the makers of chains seldom make clear, even to themselves.<sup>5</sup>

A deeper difficulty of the causal query is that it may be defined so as to conflict with the historical attitude itself. If the historian were to deduce consequences from antecedents, there would be nothing in the former not found in the latter. How then could he speak of anything new happening at all? The special sensitivity of the historian is to the novel elements, the

<sup>4</sup> Adams described his own history of the United States as an effort to state "such facts as seemed sure, in such order as seemed rigorously consequent," so as to "fix for a familiar moment a necessary sequence of human movement." *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>5</sup> Mario Bunge, *Causality: the Place of the Causal Principle in Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 126.

discontinuities, emerging in a situation. He discovers the relevant antecedents retrospectively with the help of the illumination of the consequences, which call out for a past. Looking backwards, he discerns a process that does not logically or inevitably follow from certain antecedents, but takes its life and form only from its development. There is no point at which the historian can declare that the Civil War became inevitable, even though he might find it increasingly probable. Those who have said it was inevitable have either deduced it from a dogmatic general proposition about the "necessary" conflict of classes in society, according to the determinism of historical materialism, or they have pointed instead to the stubbornness of the slavery problem and the moral and ideological imperatives which made certain policies humanly "necessary" (granted their premises), rather than historically inevitable in terms of an impersonal process.<sup>6</sup> In studying the Civil War the historian must know about such antecedents as the origins and expansion of slavery, for example, but he cannot deduce the war from the existence of that institution. "American historians have been too clever by half," Carl Becker once said, "in finding other causes of the Civil War,"<sup>7</sup> but the cleverness has been stimulated by knowledge of the fact that slavery existed and was eliminated elsewhere without civil war.

The serious difficulties of exact causal determination have led some thinkers to suggest that the historian makes reasonable estimates of causes, based upon his judgment of what *would* have taken place in the absence of a particular factor being tested for causal relevance.<sup>8</sup> If the course of events would have been much the same, the factor is assumed to have had no causal significance. Some critics have replied that history is, as

<sup>6</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., sees the Civil War as a "log-jam" which had to be "burst by violence," a common feature of the "tragedy" of history; but surely only commitment to policy positions deemed necessary and worth the price of force explains the "log-jam" he describes. See his "The Causes of the Civil War: a Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review*, 16 (1949), 969-81. Pieter Geyl, who also attacks the "revisionist" thesis of a "needless war," carefully avoids making the claim that it was inevitable, leaving the issue moot. See his "The American Civil War and the Problem of Inevitability," *New England Quarterly*, 24 (1951), 147-68.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Louis Gottschalk, Sept. 3, 1944, in C. Becker, *Detachment and the Writing of History*, ed. Phil L. Snyder (Ithaca, 1958), 88.

<sup>8</sup> See Max Weber, "Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences," reprinted in English in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, Ill., 1949), esp. 164-88.

Beard maintained, "a seamless web"; but surely it is not so seamless that historians must follow Beard in believing that there is no more reason to explain American intervention in the First World War by reference to the German policy of unlimited submarine warfare than by reference to the Kaiser's moustaches.<sup>9</sup> This extreme position denies to the historian that realistic sense of relevance which the study of history and direct experience of human affairs have traditionally provided. Many explanations in history certainly do reflect and depend upon this trained sense of relevance.<sup>10</sup> Modern historians have stressed slavery rather than states rights in explaining the crisis of 1860 because they know that the legal position of states rights has often sheltered Northerners and Southerners alike, depending on the more substantial interests it has been designed to protect. Beard himself rejected Turner's stress on the importance of free land to American development on the ground that though slavery, capitalism, and free land were "woven in one national mesh," yet "slavery would have been slavery and capitalism capitalism in essence even had there been no free land with its accompaniments."<sup>11</sup> He could only arrive at this conclusion by imaginatively breaking the web he considered "seamless." (Even so, this procedure does not convincingly support Beard's thesis of the Civil War as a necessary conflict between capitalism and agrarianism, not only because the economic issue of the tariff had been gradually composed since 1832, but because it was during the competition for and debate over the western territories that relations between the sections became embittered to a state of crisis out of which the war came.)

Sidney Hook has persuasively argued for the importance of hypotheticals contrary to fact in establishing the interrelation of events. Yet he admits that though we have the right to make such predictions when they rest upon valid generalizations about individual and social behavior, still "we have no logical guarantee that they will continue to hold or that something

<sup>9</sup> See his *The Discussion of Human Affairs* (New York, 1936), 79, where he characterizes causal judgments as subjective, arbitrary ruptures of the "seamless web" of history.

<sup>10</sup> The relevance of training to the use of "guarded generalizations," neither purely analytic nor purely synthetic, is argued convincingly by Michael Scriven, "Truisms as the Grounds for Historical Explanations," in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (Glencoe, Ill., 1958), 463-68.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Frederick Jackson Turner, May 14, 1921, Box 31, Turner Papers, The Huntington Library.

new and completely unforeseen will not crop up . . . "12 The difficulty is that in dealing from a hypothetical point of view with a particular series of events we are assuming that it will not be intersected by other seemingly unrelated series of events. For this reason our calculations, even at their best, may be "well grounded and reliable but not certain." Is the process sound enough to justify our saying that slavery was the cause of the Civil War if by assuming its absence we could reasonably demonstrate there would have been no armed conflict? We would then have to show that none of the other issues between the sections was intractable or explosive enough to generate war. The problem is that slavery was so entangled with the other grievances of a political, economic, and social character that it is artificial to separate it out, nor do we have at hand a confirmed set of generalizations about the causes of war to apply. Whatever our calculations might be, we could not satisfy the unknowns in the formula "if *a* and *only a*, then *b* and *only b*." We might well grant that though the North fought for the Union, and the South for the right of secession, still it was slavery which menaced the Union and needed Southern independence to protect its growth; even so, we could only conclude that the war was essentially fought *about* slavery, not that it was *produced* by it.

The hypothetical method of discovering causal relevance has awkward difficulties whenever the issues become complex. The historian is trained to think with respect to documentary evidence, which exists only for what did happen, not for what would have happened. He can reflect upon what might have happened in order better to evaluate what actually did happen, but to speculate on what would have happened often puts him in the position of building his hypothesis on a nest of bottomless boxes of untestable hypotheses. It is clear that the historian may sensibly ask if slavery might have expanded into the newly acquired territories in the 1850's and after. Whether or not Americans were quarrelling about "an imaginary Negro in an impossible place" has turned on a discussion of the relevance of a staple-crop system inappropriate to the arid lands of the West, the potential use of slavery in mining, the expansionist ambitions of Southerners, or the fears of some future technologi-

12 *The Hero in History: a Study in Limitation and Possibility* (New York, 1948), 122.



cal invention as potent as the cotton gin in bolstering slavery.<sup>13</sup> The question serves to highlight the possibilities contained within the situation of crisis, and it has a bearing on the historian's appreciation of the Republican's position of containment of slavery.

Doubt over the significance of an event tends to generate the conditional query as a way of resolving it. If the historian wonders why the South seceded after Lincoln's election, he might ask himself what would have happened if Senator Douglas had been elected. Since Southern Democrats had already rejected Douglas at the Charleston Convention, they *might* have found him intolerable as president. The historian cannot be sure, but the question points up the South's demands and highlights the importance to Southern eyes of Lincoln's being the leader of a sectional party committed to containment of slavery. Since men who act in history must calculate the possible consequences of various alternatives, the historian in trying to understand them is led to do the same. Questions of what would have happened can be answered, of course, only by judgments of probability based on knowledge of the actual situation. They emphasize the significance of certain happenings without pretending to an impossible certainty, specificity, or scope.

A merely utopian conditional question allows equally plausible but contradictory answers. It has, for example, been argued that if the North had let the South secede in peace, the two nations would have enjoyed future friendly relations, thus saving the terrible costs of war.<sup>14</sup> It is not surprising that a Southerner might find this assumption convincing, but it clearly includes too many imponderables to justify any firm judgment. To raise questions that cannot be reasonably answered is an exercise in futility unless they are treated only as the indirect means of drawing attention to elements of an actual situation. Asking what would have happened if the North had "let the erring sister go," only serves to force a weighing of Lincoln's policy reasons for holding a symbol of federal authority in the South, as well as of the nationalistic sentiments of the Northerners who supported him. Provided the historian maintains

<sup>13</sup> See Harry V. Jaffa, "Expediency and Morality in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates," *The Anchor Review*, 2 (1957), 199-204.

<sup>14</sup> Richard H. Shyrock, "The Nationalistic Tradition of the Civil War: A Southern Analysis," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 32 (1933), 294-305. There is a useful extract in Stamp, *op. cit.*, 45-9.

his primary interest in what actually did happen, he may with propriety, under certain conditions, ask what might have happened or what would have happened. Such questions are especially useful for evaluating policy.

The most frequent type of historical explanation usually appears in causal disguise, which helps account for the historian's reluctance to banish the idea of cause. *Cause* often functions as *reason* or *purpose*. Explanation in terms of purpose is the natural way participants in a situation account for what happens. Thus the interpretations of the Civil War that prevailed at the time were couched by the North in terms of the aims of a "conspiracy" of aggressive slave-holders and by the South in terms of the ambitions of a radical group of abolitionist "Black Republicans." These simple theses were too obviously partisan charges of blame to find acceptance by later historians, whose professional confidence is rightly based on the principle that those who come after an event can, with the help of emotional distance, awareness of consequences, and wider perspective, know more about it than any participants. But even later historians have extensively used the language of purpose. The "revisionist" thesis of a needless war produced by "blundering statesmanship" essentially interprets the war in that way, as the consequence of human judgments and passions, though it condemns them as "irrational."

The historian cannot dispense with "cause" in this sense because, as Becker put it, "men's actions have value and purpose; and if we write history in such a way as to give it meaning and significance we have to take account of these values and purposes, to explain *why* men behave as they do, what they aim to accomplish, and whether they succeed or not."<sup>15</sup> The critic might well say that a man's purpose may not be the cause of his action—yet apart from this "humanistic" concern history threatens to become a merely impersonal process which "might have occurred at any time and in any place, given a sufficient number of persons to operate the events."<sup>16</sup> It is this intense commitment to the purposive dimension of history which leads many historians to feel a strong sympathy with literature and a sullen suspicion of social science. The occasional philistinism and arrogance of some propagandists for the

<sup>15</sup> Letter (n. 7 above), 87.

<sup>16</sup> Becker, "Harnessing History," *New Republic*, 22 (1920), 322.

social sciences have made many historians understandably defensive.

Yet in cooler moments the humanistic historian must acknowledge that this purposive dimension does not exhaust history. Historians have also been keenly interested in the explanatory relevance to American history of such relatively impersonal factors as De Tocqueville's "equality of condition," Turner's "frontier hypothesis," Beard's "capitalism and agrarianism," Potter's "abundance," and Hartz's "atomistic social freedom." These explanations need not be antagonistic when they are formulated without monistic claims. Turner, despite the dogmatism of his famous essay, was committed in principle to a "multiple hypothesis" approach; Beard was increasingly led to modify the monistic and deterministic implications of his economic interpretation; and both Potter and Hartz have explicitly repudiated the sufficiency of a single-determinant explanation.<sup>17</sup> The force of these various theories lies in their capacity to illuminate structure and continuity in American history, as demonstrated by specific historical illustrations, numerous enough to give significance to the generalizations. As such, they are not so much "causes" of specific events as they are ways of segregating out long-term conditions and tendencies of American culture and development. They give contour and meaning to the stream of events insofar as the historical evidence supports the generalizations.

The causal problem becomes acute when the historian faces the task of explaining a complex series of events which have the ideal unity of a single event, like the Civil War. The general causal question is then propounded: what was "the fundamental cause" of the event? The notorious disparity of opinion on the answer to this question should suggest that there is some fallacy in seeking to find a prime mover that can be abstracted from the process to account for it, like slavery, rival economic systems, or the "blundering statesmanship" of agitators and leaders. None of these alleged fundamental causes can be understood apart from their specific historical context, nor could any person be said to understand the Civil War who

<sup>17</sup> For Turner and Beard see my *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl Becker and Charles Beard* (New Haven, 1958), 21-3, 105-6. For the others see David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954), 165; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955), 20-3.

only knew that its fundamental cause was any or all of these things. Otherwise history would merely be a cook-book for those sworn to fasting. These judgments of fundamental causality are only retrospective assessments of a reconstructed story and never a substitute for it. Actually they should be taken only as clues to the story being told. The pragmatic meaning of the assertion that slavery was "the fundamental cause" is only that the institution was so deeply entangled in the issues that divided the sections that it provides a valuable focus for examining the skein of events which culminated in war.

The historian does his work in good conscience, despite the difficulties of causality, because so much of his labor does not depend upon causal judgment. Whatever some philosophers may say, he knows that explanation is broader than causal explication. He may tell his readers much about the issues between Lincoln and Douglas, the legal status of slavery, the structure of classes in society, the economic interests of the sections, the character of the abolitionist movement, the balance of power in the Senate, the social and ideological differences between North and South, and the chronology of events without venturing beyond descriptive analysis into causal judgment. Characteristically, the historian explains by showing how a certain process took shape, answering the "why" with more of the "what" and "how." "The careful, thorough and accurate answer to the question *How*," writes the English historian C. V. Wedgwood, "should take the historian a long way towards answering the question *Why* . . ." <sup>18</sup> The historian is inescapably committed to narrative.

The relativists may quickly point out that the stories historians have told clearly reflect the "climate of opinion" in which they were constructed. Beard's economic interpretation grew out of a Progressive milieu in which the critics of industrial America had been drawn increasingly to economic analysis of contemporary problems; the "revisionism" of J. G. Randall betrayed some of the liberals' disillusionment with World War I and the fear of involvement with World War II; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s criticism of the "revisionist" thesis of "a needless war" openly compares the Nazi and Southern threats to an "open society" and reflects the post-war "hard" policy towards Soviet imperialism; and Avery Craven's latest analysis, a modi-

<sup>18</sup> *Truth and Opinion: Historical Essays* (London, 1960), 14.

fied "revisionist" view, strikes a Cassandra pose by comparing the Civil War crisis to the frightening "cold war" situation of today, where huge power-blocs compete for "satellites" and are deeply estranged from mutual understanding.<sup>19</sup> Inevitably, the historian's experience of present history will suggest questions and hypotheses, and in the attempt to relate his story to his public he will naturally try to find terms appropriate to his own age. Yet he must always be on guard against the insidious tendency of analogy to blur the important nuances of difference between a past age and his own. His fundamental premise as a historian must be that human experience significantly changes in its form and meaning, that his present is only a phase of a process which calls out for historical analysis precisely because it is not uniform and continuous. The historian may believe that while one generation passes away and another generation comes, the earth abides forever, but it is his special obligation to note that the sun also rises on a new day.

The relativism of Becker and Beard was a valuable attack on the pretensions of nineteenth-century historical positivism, but its force was blunted by remnants of the same determinism they challenged. Becker considered historical judgments transient and arbitrary because he saw the mind of the historian as a mere product of the social forces active in his setting, projecting onto the blank screen of the past his own image, shaped by the hopes and fears generated by his "climate of opinion." Beard was nostalgic for the dream of an omniscient grasp of the totality of all happenings. He knew the dream was utopian; therefore, he settled instead for an "act of faith" in historical progress towards a specific future as the basis for interpretation of the past, a prediction which future history would validate or refute. But one must reply: if involvement in present history gives the historian his need to know the past, it does not necessarily prevent him from having enough detachment to apply articulate and impersonal standards to the evidence he examines; if the historian cannot know everything, it does not follow that he cannot know anything of historical importance; if the future is opaque, the past cannot be illuminated from a

<sup>19</sup> Schlesinger specifically refers to the problem of dealing with a "closed society" in both periods in "The Causes of the Civil War: a Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review*, 16 (1949), 969-81; and the "cold war" analogy is extensively developed in Avery O. Craven, *Civil War in the Making, 1815-60* (Baton Rouge, La., 1959), esp. xiii-xiv.

source which, being still indeterminate, will not furnish any light; if the historian is truly honored, it is because of his power of hindsight, not his power of prophecy.

If historians seem to have rented out a large hotel of "rooms with a view" in order to tell their story of the Civil War, it should be remembered that the sign out front should often read, "philosophy, not history, spoken here." Much of the recent debate over the Civil War centers on philosophical issues about economic determinism or rationalist politics. The historical materialists reduce the political, ideological, and moral questions to the "inevitable" conflicts of classes in society; the "revisionists" assume that violence is abnormal and that an event as bloody and tragic as civil war must have been avoidable by "rational" men; their critics point to the intractability of moral issues and the normality of non-rational factors in history.<sup>20</sup> Historians cannot escape such philosophical questions, but they need not entail a skepticism about historical truth.

The philosophy of history in America, as Morton G. White has pointed out, has been a very poor relation indeed. (Not even the Pragmatists, who did much to stimulate interest in history, paid it the honor of systematic attention. It is therefore encouraging that Mr. White should seek to lead philosophers to consider the "special kind of discourse" which is narration.<sup>21</sup>) The causal problem would be greatly clarified if both historians and philosophers realized that in telling a story the historian is committed to the "logic" of drama. In explaining the Civil War he necessarily seeks to recreate the strife of opposing forces out of which the war came. The connective tissue of his account then has a dialectical form: a person or group takes a position and performs an action because of and in relation to the position or action of another person or group. The historian's story becomes a narrative of this reciprocal response. Thus, by a crude sketch, the explanation of the event would have this character: Lincoln saw in the South's pro-slavery position a threat to the democratic traditions of the American community; the South saw in his election the menace of future interference with their "peculiar institution" and growing domination by an industrial North; Lincoln and the

<sup>20</sup> Illustrative examples of these three positions can be found in Stamp, *op. cit.*, 56-65, 83-7, 113-22.

<sup>21</sup> "A Plea for an Analytic Philosophy of History," in Morton G. White, *Religion, Politics, and the Higher Learning* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 74.

North saw in Southern secession a challenge to federal authority and the prestige of national union; the South saw in the provisioning of Fort Sumter an intolerable danger to independence of the Confederacy . . . In such terms, but with much greater richness and concreteness, the historian tries to reconstruct the dramatic "logic" of a sequence of events which demands to be humanly understood rather than scientifically explained.

This dialectical method does not entail any Hegelian scheme or "bloodless dance of the categories"; on the contrary, it keeps the historian in touch with the familiar existential world of human action, too concrete and passionate for final abstract accounting. Like the action of a novel or play, it can be imaginatively experienced as a meaningful plot in which character, events, and circumstances are woven together in a process made intelligible in human terms of tradition, interest, passion, purpose, and policy. This kind of historical action is understood in the same way as a novel's plot is understood, though the former must be faithful to given evidence and the latter to aesthetic standards. To ask the question "why?" is then meaningful only as a demand for enlightenment on some particular passage of the story which does not "make sense." The general causal question remains at worst an irrelevant basis for interminable disagreement, at best a generator of hypotheses to stimulate research which may promote understanding by leading to a richer, more coherent story.

In reconstructing the dramatic "logic" of a situation which eventuated in civil war, historians cannot expect to achieve a flawless coherence in their stories. They have no warrant for making history neat and tidy when experience itself has ambiguities. Often there is uncertainty about motives, even for the actor himself, because the flaw lies not in the historian's impotence but in the documents or life itself. Even if historians cannot agree, to cite a classic controversy created by conflicting evidence, whether Lincoln sent a relief ship to Sumter in the cunning expectation that the South would commit aggression by firing on the fort, or, on the contrary, discovered by the attack how inaccurately he had measured the secessionist temper, nevertheless, they can still reach a common understanding of his policy reasons for risking war in the first place, whatever he expected or hoped would happen, after he had done what he felt had to be done. Historians will never escape the need for critical debate on their findings to help them move towards

a consensus of understanding, but this fate is no ground for despair. It is rather the dogmatic insistence on scientific explanations, especially when they are beyond historical competence, that dooms historians to endless and fruitless contention.

Mr. White prophesies "a new era in the philosophy of history" when "the tools of linguistic philosophy" shall be brought to bear on "clarifying the logic of narration."<sup>22</sup> Sharp as these instruments are, however, they involve the risk that the operation may kill the patient. In explaining narration it may be forgotten that narration is a form of explanation, which aims not at logical rigor of implication but at dramatic comprehensibility, appropriate to the untidy, passionate, and value-charged activities of men. Historians may be said to be engaged in constantly teaching that lesson, yet, as much of the long inconclusive debate about "the causes of the Civil War" makes clear, without really knowing it. It is time they directly confronted the specter that haunts them.

<sup>22</sup> *Loc. cit.*



## 4. *The Confederate Myth*\*

FRANK E. VANDIVER

In the states of the old Confederacy the Centennial celebration of the Civil War is to be largely a refurbishing of the Confederate myth. The Confederate myth is a vital part of life in the South. According to this legend, sanctified southern ancestors fought valiantly against virtually hopeless odds to sustain a "way of life" peculiar to the section of long, hot summers, and Negro field hands. This "way of life" never seemed to be wholly understood, but it found description in various paeans of nostalgia and in the self-image of all southerners. Key elements in the southern mode of living were tradition, dedication to the protocols of lineage, land, cotton, sun, and vast hordes of blacks. Tending southern life were a special breed represented by the planters. Not everybody by any means was a planter, but the myth holds that everybody wanted to be and that all had the same chance to rise to that pinnacle of grace—all save the noncitizens with dark skin. The planters came to hoard their status with a certain grim zeal. Under increasing pressure throughout the 1830's, 40's, and 50's, they turned to all types of protection—censorship, intimidation, propaganda, open hostility to fellow-Americans.

But their tactics were glossed by myth into a creditable struggle for self-determination against a tide of urban nationalism which threatened extinction of the "way of life" so happy and so alien to the time.

The crusade of the planters spread to a campaign for South-

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ern Rights, and hence the small farmer, the town merchant, the southern clergy found themselves sharing the planter's war. What was good for the planter was good for the South.

War, according to the myth, may not have been the only way to save the social and economic order, but it showed how deeply dedicated were the southerners to their inarticulated "rights." Against forces most formidable the southerner pitted himself, his small fortune, his Lilliputian industry, his life, and his girded honor. He lost, but lost magnificently. He lost wholly, utterly, but out of the ashes of his homes, his cities, his broken generation, he salvaged his sacred honor. And with this scrap of victory he could build the myth that has sustained him, has shackled him to a false image, and has convinced him of a lasting difference between himself and the rest of the United States.

Marshall Fishwick, in a brave and controversial essay, "Robert E. Lee: The Guardian Angel Myth" (*Saturday Review*, March 4, 1961), points out that Lee's noble virtues, peerless leadership, and heroic acceptance of defeat fixed in the southern mind the meaning of the Lost Cause. That cause represented the true acme of southern achievement; for it died the flower of the South, and those who yielded up their blood were such southerners as all those who came since would like to be. They were the shining model, the marble image, the men above men who lived a brief moment as destiny's chosen. They were the South.

They still are the South, for they stand above, around, and beyond what the South now is, and loom as silent prophets to lesser men in troubled times. And so they are God and curse, inspiration and death. Their stone faces look from countless shafts to the past, and their sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons look with them. They are different from the present; they were alien to their time. So, too, the modern southerner who points to difference, to his ageless "white man's burden" and his genteel poverty. His ancestors lurking from musty picture frames stood against the leviathan state and its leveling tendencies. He, too, stands with his own perception of past obligations and future duties. If the rest of the nation has lost its agrarian innocence, the southerner remembers. He, at least, is faithful to a dim Jeffersonian image and to a Greek democracy ideal which came, was fleetingly touched by life and sustained by blood, and faded to the pantheon of lost glories. But the

brief blood bath lent a strange endurance and gave hope to generations held tight in inertia, fear, poverty, and the horror of a lost dream and a shattered mirror. The broken image had to be conjured again, and when it came it was twisted into a grotesque sort of plaster beauty which satisfied its designers and doomed the past it seemed to limn to a hundred years of distortion.

Distorting Civil War southerners was not easy. They lived larger than most, fought, raged, cowed, bled, spoke, and died with the nobility of desperation. They were, like their northern brethren, touched with timeless animation. They were unique and so should have been immune to the myth-makers and falsifiers of history. But myth-makers are determined and their works often approved by necessity. So the Confederate changed from a human, striving, erring being to something much different. All Confederates automatically became virtuous, all were defenders of the rights of states and individuals, all were segregationists, all steadfast, all patriotic.

Like all lasting myths, this one had enough validity to sound good. The Lost Cause came on to the present as the last American resistance against the Organization State, against racial indistinction, against mass and motor.

And while post-Civil War southerners were pushing as fast as they could into the New South, were grasping Yankee dollars with enthusiasm, they purified their motives in the well of Lost Causism. Politicians found it a bottomless source of bombast and ballots, preachers found it balm and solace to somewhat reluctant middle-class morals, writers found it a noble and salable theme. What the South had been could be the touchstone for the future, could be the fundament of a section going into the industrial age with part of its heart and holding firm to the past with the other.

Lost Causism came to fulfil a role similar to that of the pro-slavery argument in ante-bellum times. It offered justification for resistance to the leveling tendencies continued by harsh Reconstruction measures. It cloaked the lawless Klansman and lent license to the segregating Christian. It was, finally, the cornerstone of the New South.

The tragedy is that the Confederate myth is so wrong. That the Confederacy could come to represent in the present things it never represented in its lifetime is an irony of the present southern dilemma.

What, then, are some of the axioms of the Confederate myth?

First: The Confederate States represented the unified nationalistic yearning of all the state rights advocates in the South.

Wrong. State righters were not unified and there is considerable doubt that they were in the majority when the Confederacy took form in February, 1861. Certain it is that they failed to gain control of the government under Jefferson Davis, and although they did much to impede the Confederate war effort, they did not dominate the high councils.

Second: The Confederacy was defended to the last by gaunt gray heroes who went with Lee and Johnston and others to the bitterest end.

Wrong again. There was probably more per capita desertion from Confederate ranks than from the ranks of the Union. Far more Rebel troops were absent from roll call at the end of the war than were with the colors. Much bravery, even shining, incredible heroism the southern men did display, but that they were all blind patriots is demonstrably untrue.

Third: Any Confederate could lick ten Yankees.

Possibly, but in the end the Rebels were "overwhelmed."

Fourth: Everyone behind the Confederate lines showed the same dauntless dedication to oblivion as the soldiery. Men, women, and children all served the cause to the last shred of cloth, the last window weight, the last crust of bread.

Not so. While there were many magnificent examples of fate-defying loyalty by southern civilians, there were also many examples of petty speculation, wanton brigandage, Unionism, criminal selfishness, and treason. Defection behind the lines, open resistance to Confederate laws, became a matter of national scandal before the conflict ended.

Fifth: All Confederate leaders were unswervingly dedicated to the cause and would have preferred to perish rather than survive under a despised and crushing victor.

Still wrong. Many Confederate leaders, including Davis, Stephens, Lee, and Stonewall Jackson, looked on secession with a jaundiced eye. Legal they thought it to be, but they doubted its practicality. And when the war ended only a few of the leaders who survived buried themselves in the past. Davis did, and so did lasting disservice to the section he strove to defend. Lee, on the other hand, put the war behind him and worked unsparingly for a prosperous New South sharing fully the destiny of a re-United States. His example set the tone for most

terans. Numbers of former generals, to be sure, used their combat records to gain some personal advantage, but most wanted that advantage to further a career in business or politics and hence partook of the new industrial age.

Sixth: The Confederacy fought not only for state rights, but so and especially to preserve racial integrity. The government and the people of the embattled southern states were blindly against letting down racial barriers and understood that northern victory would mean abolition. The Negro was kept in his place in the Confederacy, was used only for agricultural and menial tasks, and what was good enough for the Confederates is good enough for us.

False, and this is false on two levels. During the war the South did attempt for a time to shore up the bonds of servitude, but when the pressure of defeat grew grim, various southern leaders, including Lee and Davis, came to advocate the release of slaves in the army; some even suggested freedom in return for service. And after the war, on the level of special pleading, the South engaged in a long paper conflict with northern historians about the causes of the fighting. A point which the southerners strove staunchly to sustain was that the war had not been fought to preserve slavery, but to preserve the "Southern Way of Life," of which slavery was only an aspect. Finally some argued that the war had been fought solely to gain independence, and cited the offer to England in March, 1865, of total freedom in exchange for recognition as proof.

Seventh: The Confederate government was a supreme, unsullied example of a state rights organization that remained loyal to the principles of Calhoun, even in face of defeat.

This is the wrongest of all assumptions. Davis and his administration tried for a while to do what seemed constitutional under the narrow southern view of law, but war and a curiously unnoticed strain of mind in the South changed the course of governmental conduct.

Union sentiment, long-standing in many parts of the South, mixed with conservative Democratic sentiment and with latent Whiggery to introduce a new element in southern politics. Men who looked on violent change with repugnance banded together to prevent the secessionists from carrying the Confederacy to revolutionary excesses. These men, including Davis himself, kept the Montgomery Convention in hand, saw to it that the end toward vast, ruinous upheaval was halted by moderate

counsel. The result of moderate control at Montgomery was a Confederate constitution much like that of the Union, a government based on established and familiar federal principles, and a president who had not camped with the fire-eaters. Many with these cautious views were elected to the various Confederate congresses and so held some authority through the war.

Caution and the natural conservatism of some Democrats and Whigs did not mean that these members of the Confederate Congress were unwilling to fight a hard war. Most of these southern moderates were men dedicated to strong central government as the main bulwark of law and order. They hated disturbance and resisted disruption of the Union. But when it came, they "went with their state," they stayed with family and land. They stayed, too, with principles of steady government, strong law, and established order. Consequently they stood for power in the hands of the executive, power in the federal government, and a stern war effort.

It was these Whiggish moderates who came to represent the Confederate "left" and to urge big government to fight a big war. They knew something of the corporate state, saw that it had virtues for organization, and urged Davis and his cabinet to centralize and command. These neo-organization men supported the growth of a large army, strict taxation (in keeping with sound Whig monetary views), conscription, impressment of private property, and finally the use of Negro slaves in the ranks—even to the point of manumission in return for service. When the war ended, these same "leftists" of the Confederacy moved into the New South.

Many became leaders in new southern industries, some went into politics and supported the coming of northern capital, most stood for sound finances, restoration of order, and the onward march of business. These moderates, these quiet men who abhorred revolution but used it when they had to, were the ones who brought about the greatest revolution of the South. They changed the Confederacy right under the eyes of the rabid secessionists from a localistic community into a small industrial power run along centralized lines. They aroused resistance from the Confederate "right"—state righters and fire-eaters—but kept control and forced their opponents to adopt modern centralist measures to resist them. When their attempt to remake the wartime South ended in defeat, they continued their efforts with the aid of Radical Republicans and ultimately

achieved their goal. The Old South disappeared in the smoke of Chattanooga's and Birmingham's iron furnaces, in the dust of Alabama's coal pits, in the busy marts of Atlanta, Houston, Memphis, and New Orleans. These quiet, soft action men were the ones who set the base for the rise of a new industrial giant south of Mason and Dixon's Line, a giant whose future, according to Professor Walter Prescott Webb, is limitless because of its natural resources.

But in one salient respect these Whiggish gentlemen failed to remold their native section: this boundless potential painted by Webb and many chambers of commerce is sharply restricted by the Confederate myth. Although the moderate businessmen of the Confederate and New South were willing and partially able to set the black man free, and did break the bonds of southern agriculture, they could not unshackle the mind of the South—the Negro became a symbol of all troubles, and the Confederacy lingered as the herald of the South's greatness. The myth holds that the South was so great when it fought with piteous ardor for a twisted past and for principles aged and vestigial, that there was no future left for it. Its future lay buried with its gray dead.

This stultifying acceptance of decline is the wages of the Confederate myth. What was, was pure and better than what is, and in what was lies a sort of self-realization. While the South was transformed by Confederates into a moderately modern, progressive nation, the myth twists the achievement of the rebellious generation and dooms descendants to cheating themselves. Acceptance of the illusion of rabid Confederate racism, for instance, leads the modern Confederate to waste a vast source of manpower—a source which could be of inestimable value if the South is to move into the rosy future that some have predicted for it.

The Centennial years could best be devoted to revising the Confederate myth and bringing it up to date. Instead of standing for a pseudo-past, for false traditions and sham virtues, it should be repaired by the reality of perspective into what it has always been. Lee, Davis, members of the Confederate Congress, many soldiers who fell gallantly on scores of fields, were alert, forward-looking southerners. They were willing, for the sake of their cause, to abandon old shibboleths, to change the very nature of their body politic and body social. Instead of looking back and making war with weapons withered by age,

they looked at the new ones their enemies used and copied, improved, progressed. The Confederate States of America did not have America in the name for nothing. Confederates were Americans, too, and so had no fear of challenge. The Rebels accepted challenge and almost met it. Most of them surely would regard with scorn their descendants who look backward in frustration.



## PART TWO

### Objectivity and Truth in History

#### *Introductory Notes*

Modern American historians have studied the past with a dual consciousness. Their avowed purpose has been to present historical truth. No statement of intention has been more famous than that of Leopold von Ranke, who declared that he wished "only to show what actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). If the precept had meant, to Ranke, a philologist's ideal for using the sources critically, it came to mean, to the American historian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a scientific historian's ideal for seeking historical truth. In 1880, Herbert Levi Osgood, the principal founder of the new school of American colonial history, hailed Ranke for "the priceless lesson" he had taught the historian: "to discover the truth and to state it with absolute impartiality." The battle cry of the historian, said George Burton Adams, in 1908, should be "the call of our first leader, proclaiming the chief duty of the historian to establish *wie es eigentlich gewesen*."

But if American historians have, like their compeers in other lands, sought truth and objectivity, they have also been aware that their quest was fraught with difficulty. Truth, after all, could be only in the eye of the beholder. Thus, while many historians were proclaiming the Rankean ideal, Albert Bushnell Hart, among others, was questioning it:

It was all very well for Ranke to begin his lectures: "I will simply tell you how it was." Did not his students really get "how it was" as seen through the mind of Ranke? The dictum that history must be objective, that it consists in a proper marshalling of facts, leaves out of account the varieties in historical characters and in historical writers. What a man does is conditioned by the make-up of his mind; by what he thinks about what he does; and in addition the reader's judgment is affected by the mental peculiarities of the historian who describes the mental process.

If truth could be no more than one historian's truth, it could also be no more than the truth of one age. Each age could construe the past in its own way. This idea of historical relativism was increasingly voiced, as the decades of the twentieth century wore on, by many prominent historians both in Europe and America. Its most notable spokesman abroad was Benedetto Croce, who said that all written history has "the character of 'contemporary history' because, however remote in time events there recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate."

In the United States, the most notable expositors of the relativist approach to historical truth were Carl Becker and Charles A. Beard. In his presidential address to the American Historical Association, in 1931, Becker argued that "every generation, our own included, will, most inevitably, understand the past and anticipate the future in the light of its own restricted experience, must inevitably play on the dead whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind." In 1935, Beard echoed these sentiments, asserting that the writer of history was "a creature of time, place, circumstances, interests, predilections, culture" and that "he may search for, but he cannot find, the 'objective truth' of history, or write it, 'as it actually was.'" In 1946, in a report entitled *Theory and Practice in Historical Study*, the Committee on Historiography of the Social Science Research Council offered further support of historical relativism, showing how historians in each era write under a particular set of controlling assumptions and how these assumptions change from one era to the next.

In the years following World War II, the dialogue continued on the question of truth and objectivity in historical writing, and the three essays that follow form part, in one respect or

another, of the dialogue. Bert James Loewenberg and J. H. Hexter explore the tenets of historical relativism both to test their validity and to consider their implications for the study of history. Professor Loewenberg, who teaches at Sarah Lawrence College, has long been interested in modern intellectual history, with a special interest in Darwinian thought and its influence. His books include: *Darwin, Wallace, and the Theory of Natural Selection* (1959), and *Evolution and Natural Selection* (1959), an edition of Darwin's writings. Professor Hexter, a specialist in Tudor and Stuart history, has taught at Queens College and Washington University, and is now at Yale University. His *Reappraisals in History* (1961) has received widespread critical acclaim; it is a collection of previously published essays, in which Professor Hexter challenged, with hard questions, sober sense, and cold facts, concepts that too many historians had been too prone to accept. His other works include: *The Reign of King Pym* (1941) and an edition of *More's Utopia* (1964).

In his essay on "The Historian and History," Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. deals with the historian's quest for objectivity and, in particular, with the problem of how far he can participate in making history and yet remain objective. This problem has been especially important for Professor Schlesinger because of his own role as special assistant to President John F. Kennedy during the years 1961-63. Before then, he taught at Harvard. His writings have earned him several awards, including the Pulitzer prize in history in 1945, for *The Age of Jackson*, and the Parkman prize in 1957, for the first installment of his multi-volume history, *The Age of Roosevelt*.

The question of how to achieve truth and objectivity in historical inquiry remains a vital one. If historians are too sophisticated to believe in a certain truth and complete objectivity, they are too hopeful to yield to the hopelessness of complete relativism. Chastened by the knowledge that their inquiry may reflect their own prepossessions no less than their era's, they are increasingly concerned with understanding the deeper assumptions underlying the histories they write. The historian's responsibility, they know, extends to a knowledge of his premises no less than of his materials; no less than being fully aware of his sources, he must be aware of the ways he uses them.

The historian's growing concern with his premises is reflected in a recent report of the Committee on Historical Analysis of the Social Science Research Council, entitled *Generalization in*

*the Writing of History* (1963). The volume contains, among several others, an illuminating essay of David M. Potter's, which touches ultimately on the problem of historical truth and objectivity, pointing out as it does how historians, quite unconsciously, formulate relationships between separate items of historical data. A conscious analysis of the nature of these relationships, Professor Potter suggests, would be most salutary, because "it would serve the purpose which is served by many other unattainable goals, such as the goal to 'know thyself.' For even a failing attempt to get there would take the historian far along a road which he needs to travel."

#### *Suggestions for Further Reading*

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## 5. *Some Problems Raised by Historical Relativism\**

BERT JAMES LOEWENBERG

According to the relativist dogma, the past always eludes us. Nothing is so fleeting as memory; nothing so pallid as the documents that record the throbbing life of a bygone age. Only a part of the past can be rescued from the oblivion in which yesterday has already enshrouded it. The deepest experiences of life happen to individuals, and neither art nor science can truly transmit them to posterity. Lofty aspirations and vibrant passions are buried with those once stirred by them, beyond the power of manuscripts, coins, and monuments to recall. Since the whole of the past can never be recaptured, once it has been lived it is literally gone forever. To hope that disciplined imagination and scholarly effort can re-create what was actually thought, felt, and done in former times is sheer illusion.<sup>1</sup>

But while these arguments lack logical vigor, they present one of the vital problems that the relativist critique of certainty has thrust upon modern scholarship. What kinds of knowledge does the historian seek? Are there any special characteristics attaching to historical knowledge? And how much of the nature

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<sup>1</sup> M. Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* (New York, 1938), pp. 19, 20, 23, 86, and 87. The argument that every event is infinitely richer than any later account of it can be involves the fallacy of equating "knowledge" with complete knowledge (*ibid.*, p. 84 and chaps. ii and v). J. H. Randall, Jr., and G. Haines IV, "Controlling assumptions in the practice of American historians," *Theory and Practice in Historical Study: a Report of the Committee on Historiography* (hereafter cited as *Report*) ("Social Science Research Council bulletins," No. 54) (New York, 1946), pp. 17 and 25.

of knowledge itself is it needful to know before tentative answers to these questions can be formulated? The crux of the relativist contention, however, makes these questions even more compelling. Every intellectual effort is limited by the psychology of the person making it and the sociology of the conditions under which it is made. While the validity of this position is undeniable, the relativist goes further in maintaining that the degree of truth assignable to any assertion depends upon the prior knowledge of who says what as well as what is said.<sup>2</sup>

Even if it were possible somehow to circumvent the elusive character of the facts with which the historian deals, it is impossible to circumvent the limitations which beset the historian. For mortals—including historians—are not free; and the objectivity and neutrality pursued so avidly by an earlier generation belong to the immortals alone. The great names of historiography—Herodotus, Polybius, Niebuhr, Ranke, Greene—have long supplied critics with an irresistible opportunity for a display of erudition.<sup>3</sup> In the process a platitude was elevated to the rank of a postulate, namely, that every age must re-write history in its own terms. For the sophisticated, every man became his own historian; for the vulgar, history became "bunk." But the result in both cases was more or less the same—an anarchy of individual judgments, the sole and indefeasible right to a private world of historical truth.<sup>4</sup>

For this as for everything else philosophers have a word—subjectivism—but the consequence, called by whatever name, is chaos.<sup>5</sup> An infinite regress of relativisms is inescapable, for if an analyst evaluates a proposition or a fact in terms of the elements conditioning it, that evaluation in turn demands an analysis of the limitations of the evaluator. To this process there is logically no end. And when knowledge is conceived as "an act of faith,"<sup>6</sup> it comes perilously close to the same confusion

<sup>2</sup> Mandelbaum, p. 84; for his discussion of Karl Mannheim see pp. 67–82.

<sup>3</sup> F. J. Teggart, *Theory and Processes of History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1941), p. 12, n. 1, and pp. 13–17.

<sup>4</sup> C. Becker, *Everyman his own Historian* (New York, 1935), pp. 233–55, esp. 246, 248, 254, and 255. In this connection see Mandelbaum, p. 177, and his comments on Beard cited below.

<sup>5</sup> E. H. Sloane, "Rationalization," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLI (1944), 19.

<sup>6</sup> C. A. Beard, "Written history as an act of faith," *American Historical Review*, XXXIX (1934), 219–31. *Report*, p. 21, represents, I think, a doubtful usage of the term. An "act of faith" is not an assumption in the same sense that an assumption is an "act of faith." Apart from this

unless the phrase implies that postulates of social knowledge, like all other knowledge, are ultimately assumptions. To reject the vicious relativism of infinite regress does not demand a rejection of all relativisms. Neither does it suggest an endorsement of any variety of absolute truth or necessarily propel its critics in the direction of absolutism.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, historical relativism compels a re-examination of the idea of the past. If only a fragment of the past is discernible—a fragment, moreover, selected in response to issues, principles, and concepts rooted in the present—it is manifest that the past can no longer be employed with customary looseness. Whimsical though it may appear, historians have overestimated the past. Acceptance of relativist premises makes it difficult to understand the past in the traditional sense of a literal past. The past is no longer relevant to itself alone; the major significance of any past belongs rather to the culture whose members are engaged in interpreting it. Relativism has shifted the historical center of gravity to the present. The object of the historical quest is no longer a past, for insights into social life and human behavior of vanished eras are sought *for* something: the resolution of a contemporary dilemma, the validation of a contemporary judgment. What is compelling in the past is determined by what is compelling in the present. The key to significance is always supplied by assumptions currently held and based, in turn, upon future considerations currently entertained. The past is endowed with meanings for living men only in the sense that segments of the past are implicated in contemporary relations. Watt's contribution to the steam engine is a part of the living

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the usage is dubious on semantic grounds since the phrase connotes psychological elements of belief which the word "assumption" is designed to avoid. The paragraphs following, pp. 20 and 21, raise the basic questions of judgment and value in an acute form. See Mandelbaum's criticism of Beard, pp. 90, 91, and 178; and C. A. Beard and A. Vagts, "Currents of thought in historiography," *American Historical Review*, XLII (1937), 460-83.

<sup>7</sup> Mandelbaum, p. 98. Exponents of naturalism may ignore absolutism or any type of idealism if they choose. Such hypotheses, however, are clearly legitimate, competing ones. Accordingly, a major criticism of the *Report* is its emphasis. Beard's introduction is adequate as an introduction, but "Controlling assumptions" by Randall and Haines requires expansion (pp. 17-23 and esp. 20-23). The "problems of terminology," "propositions," etc., are less propositions than hypotheses stemming from the major philosophy upon which the whole volume is based. For the most part, they are valid only if the philosophy itself is valid.

past; the death of X in Tudor England is as dead a part of the past as he. "There is no material," says John Dewey, "available for leading principles and hypotheses save that of the historic present." And, he comments in another place: "Only when the past event which is judged is a going concern having effects still directly observable are judgments and knowledge possible."<sup>8</sup> The past has become a means rather than an end. Moreover, no past is ever more than a partial past, fragmental not only because incomplete but also because always refracted through the eyes of succeeding presents.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, accretions of knowledge are not built up by the slow accumulation of data extracted from the past by the patient labors of dispassionate scholars. Knowledge results from differing perspectives of progressive generations who look at different aspects of posterity as altering contemporary goals dictate. Knowledge of the past, it is true, comes out of the past but in a reverse temporal order. The so-called "facts" are latent in the past, but it is a continuing series of presents which shapes the contour of objectives. Geological facts, for example, were always imbedded beneath the surface of the earth, but the pre-uni-

<sup>8</sup> J. Dewey, *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry* (New York, 1938), p. 233, and "Realism without monism or dualism. I," *Journal of Philosophy*, XIX (1922), 311 (italics his.). Cf. *Report*, p. 20; and Becker, p. 240. Cf. Becker, p. 231, with Dewey, *Logic*; Teggart, pp. 19 and 23. Howard K. Beale's conclusion *Report*, p. 91, "the constantly shifting kaleidoscope of hypotheses about the causes of the Civil War," is exactly what we should expect according to this thesis of "past and present" interrelations. "Scientific exactitude" may not be a reasonable or realizable ideal for social science; it may also be a descriptive phrase in physical science. In any case, the essential problem seems to be how to assess, control, evaluate, "already held theses" (*Report*), not to exorcise them—how, in other words, to incorporate them into hypotheses and repeatedly to test them.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, *Logic*, pp. 230-39. "Where the past has left no trace or vestige of any sort that endures into the present its history is irrecoverable" (*ibid.*, p. 231). L. Reis and P. O. Kristeller ("Some remarks on the method of history," *Journal of Philosophy*, XL [1943], 232) present a point of view contrary to that presented above. Dewey even implies that the use of the word "past" is confusing: "I should prefer to say, knowledge about past events or involving them" ("Realism without monism or dualism," *loc. cit.*, p. 309). P. Weiss, "History and the historian," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLII (1945), 173; M. G. White, "The attack on the historical method," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLII (1945), 316 and 318; *Report*, pp. 19, 20, and 47; and B. J. Loewenberg, *The History of Ideas: 1935-1945* (New York, 1947), p. 17. Self-styled conservators of the past who attack something called the "cult of the contemporary" represent a confusion of ideas rather than of words, if the interpretation of the past presented above is tenable.



formitarians excavated one set of facts; evolutionary geologists another. The epic engraved on the timeless rocks spelled out one story of Georges Cuvier and a different story to Charles Lyell. And the facts of natural history did not impress Louis Agassiz as they later impressed Charles Darwin. In short, we *reconstruct* the past as we reconstruct any other body of data, and changes in interpretation and depths of understanding are gauged by present orientations tinged by considerations of an impending future.

The meaning of the shift in temporal emphasis becomes even more apparent when it is recalled that the writing of history is inevitably selective. Once this proposition is accepted, the crucial issue for all past reconstruction becomes the choice of principles of selection and the criteria by which they are chosen. As principles of selection grow out of present problems, it follows that the present is the matrix of historical judgment—both with regard to controlling issues and to standards of importance and value. The present, therefore, is always with us; it is an unalterable part of the historian's universe. The problem then becomes not how to know the past in any older sense but how attainable knowledge of the past can be rendered precise, accurate, and objectively verifiable. What consequences follow from an acceptance of the proposition that history is anchored in the present even if indissolubly linked with the past? If this is intellectually respectable doctrine, is objective historical knowledge possible?<sup>10</sup>

The fatal weakness of the historical enterprise, runs the contention, lies in the intellectual process of reconstruction rather than in the "facts" which are its ingredients. Ancient historiographical principles and modern relativistic ones have combined to imprison the historian in a cul-de-sac of futility. Without concepts, hypotheses, and laws, a science of history is impossible; with concepts, hypotheses, and laws, a science of history is inconceivable. That history deals with the concrete and the particular and science with the universal is a doctrine as old as Aristotle. Both science and philosophy were crowned with the virtue of universality whereas history was relegated to a concern with singular events. The office of the historian was to ferret out the "facts"; it was the function of others to generalize them.

<sup>10</sup> Becker, pp. 242-43; A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York, 1933), pp. 4, 5, and 8, and *The Aims of Education and other Essays* (New York, 1929), pp. 44.

But there are two sides to this quandary. On the one hand, the particular, rigidly bounded by time and space, cannot be transcended; on the other hand, historical events are unique and hence unrepeatable. If the historian elects to reside in the realm of "facts," however unique, he is mortgaged by their nature; if he chooses to explore the universe of abstractions, even if confined to inference from documents, he may transcend the particular only under the liabilities of relativism. Facts are determinate; concepts the offspring of reason. A part of the texture of these assumptions must be unraveled before our major problem can be resolved.<sup>11</sup>

Compulsion to render history "scientific" placed particular, concrete "fact" or the empirical data—dates, documents, battles, individuals—at a premium and generalizations—theories, concepts, laws, values—at a discount. To do so was to conform to the canons of science, to obey the injunctions of induction. The result for the historiography of the nineteenth century was the same as for the science of the sixteenth—the banishment of values from critical scholarship.

Relativist aversion for value judgments is in part predicated upon a misunderstanding of the methods of physical science. The "facts" of the past—or the facts of any social situation—are something other than the facts of science. The facts of science are held to be objective and certifiable in a way in which the facts of social life and individual behavior are not. Physical and astronomical concepts refer to concrete realities; ethical, logical, and mathematical concepts do not. The former are based upon tangible particulars; the latter upon abstractions without physical referents. The source of confusion does not stem from hoary distinctions between particulars and universals; it derives rather from the notions of scientific method popularized by Bacon and Renaissance thinkers. Under Baconian precepts a precise dis-

<sup>11</sup> M. R. Cohen, "Causation and its application to history," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 21; M. Mandelbaum, "Causal analysis in history," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 31 and 32; Teggart, pp. 5, 41, and 57-59. S. Lebergott writes: "That function of history which deals with the description and reconstruction of specific, unique, and concrete events, rather than with the formulation of general laws" ("Chance and circumstance; are laws of history possible?" *Journal of Philosophy*, XLI [1944], 227; see also p. 404). Reis and Kristeller, *loc cit.*, p. 226; M. G. White, "A note on the method of history," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLI (1944), 317, and "The attack on the historical method," *loc cit.*, p. 317; and A. Hofstadter, "Generality and singularity in historical judgment," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLII (1945), 57.

inction existed between induction and deduction, between observation of the facts of nature stripped of valuational factors and all other varieties of phenomena. Concrete externalities, supremely neutral and completely indifferent to human considerations, when weighed, measured, and analyzed in terms of their simple parts and compound structures, allegedly permitted investigators to induce hypotheses free of subjective elements. Deduction inevitably proceeded from principles fashioned by human beings infected, to that extent, with human aspirations, motives, and ends. The facts of the external world were grasped, and in some mysterious way they spoke for themselves.<sup>12</sup>

But the acquisition of "fact" is not the reward of patient and careful observation. Indeed, a fact may be said to be a fact only after investigation, or, to borrow a distinction already well known, it is postanalytic rather than preanalytic. And the beginning of wisdom, as Goethe once observed, is the recognition that every fact was once a theory. Facts in this sense are made; they are the products of intellectual effort. They do not, as Morris R. Cohen, affirmed, "stream into empty minds." He continued: "We need ideas or hypotheses. It is only when we have an hypothesis that we have something to look for. Without ideas, nature is only one big blooming confusion."<sup>13</sup> But traffic with

<sup>12</sup> M. R. Cohen, *Preface to Logic* (New York, 1944), p. 157; Lebergott, *loc. cit.*, p. 393; P. P. Wiener ("On methodology in the philosophy of history," *Journal of Philosophy*, XXXVIII [1941], 323), illustrates the degree to which science has reconstructed its premises; Lebergott asks: "Should not history have the same privilege?" (*loc. cit.*, p. 395, n. 6); E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science* (New York, 1927); M. R. Cohen, *Reason and Nature* (New York, 1931), pp. 12, 16, and 17; Becker, pp. 249 and 250; Mandelbaum, "Causal analysis in history," *loc. cit.*, pp. 33 and 34. It is important to note that if one of the implications of relativism is correct, there could be no concept of historical causation since the "structure" of events inheres in the historian rather than in the "facts" (*ibid.*, pp. 34 and 35; *Report*, pp. 24, 25, 31, 32, and 129). Teggart (p. 40), however, affirms that scientific movements of the later nineteenth century had little influence on historiography.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Preface to Logic*, p. 157; and H. Blumer, "Science without concepts," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXXVI (1931), 520. J. Dewey writes: "The performance of analytic observation . . . involves experiment; it does not precede it. And it is guided by some idea or suggestion in most cases" ("An analysis of reflective thought," *Journal of Philosophy*, XIX [1922], 33; see also 29-38). See *Report*, pp. 26, 32, and reference there cited; and R. Popkin, "Definitions in social science," *Journal of Philosophy*, XL (1943), 491-95. Priority of conceptualization obviously alters the nature of "fact" and its meaning. The sanctity of fact must derive from characteristics other than its primacy. While perception is thereby complicated,

ideas or concepts, it need hardly be added, destroys the sacred character of concrete particulars, rendering them as vulnerable to relativist attack as any other species of human intellectual endeavor.

Yet if the kind of fact defined by the philosophers of science in earlier centuries and the "scientific historians" who followed does not exist, it is futile to seek it. Even if we are compelled by the nature of the process to commence with concepts, objective knowledge is not thereby rendered impossible. But the burden of scholarship has altered. Instead of striving to eliminate concepts in order to deal with "pure fact," scholars are charged with the necessity of sharpening concepts, of making them public, and of exposing them to constant examination. These liabilities may, to be sure, make knowledge more difficult and less confident, but it will also make the knowledge gradually and progressively achieved more adequate. Concepts must be made "scientific" in the sense that they demand explicit statement and restatement: they must be made open to repeated challenge which is the basic test of all hypothecation.

Historical relativists are under further obligation. They must painstakingly distinguish between types of relativism—between subjective and objective relativism, for example—and face the consequences of altered intellectual standpoints with candor. Above all, they must render their assumptions as clear as language permits. Assuredly this is the most difficult of tasks, but to shirk the attempt is to abdicate in favor of the absolutism of past certainties or to surrender to the subjectivism of individual judgments. "The formation of historical judgments," in Dewey's words, "lags behind that of physical judgments not only because of greater complexity and scantiness of data, but also because to a large extent historians have not developed the habit of stating to themselves and to the public the systematic conceptual structures which they employ in organizing their data to anything like the extent in which physical inquirers expose their con-

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it is also rendered more meaningful. The alteration, moreover, demonstrates, as Cohen remarks (*Preface to Logic*, p. 157), that "science is not a knowledge of mere particulars, but rather a knowledge of the way in which classes of things are related." Consequently, "induction" is a process no longer definable in the older sense, and the supposed dichotomy between inductive and deductive methods, stemming from such assumptions, can no longer be made the basis of "primal fact" or the warrant for ostracizing value from scientific study.

ceptual framework. Too often the conceptual framework is left as an implicit presupposition."<sup>14</sup>

Precise formulations and sharp distinctions assure the continuing clash of opposing doctrines, indispensable to such intellectual assurance as we are permitted to enjoy. "Unless," Cohen warned, "we are willing to examine minutely and critically all the logically possible alternatives to the various accepted moral judgments with the same detachment with which the mathematician studies non-Euclidean geometries, the physicist non-Newtonian mechanics, or the biologist new theories of pathology, we are advocates, not genuine philosophers."<sup>15</sup> Historians are not likely to achieve any greater degree of detachment than biologists or philosophers, but emotional identification with a point of view can be exposed, if it cannot be dissolved, only by the competition of hypotheses in the arena of analysis. Relativists are therefore charged with meeting all the objections directed against the more general philosophy upon which the inferences of relativism rest. Specifically, they must answer to the bill of intellectual indictment drawn up against the instrumental-operational-functional theory of knowledge and must be prepared to meet, not to parry, the objections of its critics who proceed from different metaphysical assumptions. Is Dewey's philosophical system a methodology and not a metaphysic? Do the limitations of relativism apply only to time and place and not to meanings? Are value judgments mere "ejaculations of emotion"; or are values capable of scientific validation?

Values cannot be ostracized from the democracy of learning without violence to its inherent nature and final purpose. The effort to make the social studies chaste by eliminating human personalities must be appraised in the light of the specific compulsions and interests which dictated the attempt. Although scientific objectivity was created to eradicate value judgments, it was never more than an instrument or an operational tech-

<sup>14</sup> Dewey, *Logic*, p. 233; and *Report*, p. 105, concerning need for definition of terms. Beard leaves out of account the fact that if precision exists in certain areas of scholarship, it exists for historians too. *Report*, p. 105; and Blumer, *loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> M. R. Cohen, "Vision and technique in philosophy," *The Faith of a Liberal* (New York, 1946), p. 386. For illustrations of the type of criticism relativism must be prepared to meet see A. O. Lovejoy, "Pragmatism and the new materialism," *Journal of Philosophy*, XIX, 1922, 5-15; and Mandelbaum, "Causal analysis in history," *loc. cit.*, p. 25, n. 9, and p. 38, n. 24.

nique. Subsequently it was identified with scholarly purpose, and a passionate neutrality became one of the supreme values of scientific inquiry. Whether history can be made "scientific" is no longer pertinent. Not only is the yearning for the halo of science, as Cohen often pointed out,<sup>16</sup> a question of honor and prestige, of status in the hierarchy of knowledge, but the consequence of a confusion of the nature of the method of physical science and the methods and the goals of history.

To eliminate value judgments reflects a wishful urge no less confounding because comprehensible. Relativist analysis makes them as much a part of the historian's equipment as they are ineradicable elements of the world he hopes to understand and control. His struggle to understand and control the world, given these assumptions, is not likely to be enhanced simply by ignoring their existence. And the dismissal of values means the dismissal of criteria of import from the province of exact and forthright criticism, a procedure fatal to meaningful scholarship. "Neutrality" is a tyrannous word which needs redefinition. "It is hard," remarks a contemporary philosopher in a comment equally applicable to any field of knowledge, "to see how a philosophy that is without significance can escape being an insignificant philosophy."<sup>17</sup> The function of the historian is to cope with values, not to strive to circumvent them.<sup>18</sup> To choose between values in a given social context is a practical imperative. Moreover, "any aseptic refusal to make moral choices is to do

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, *Preface to Logic*, p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> L. Sears, "Responsibilities of philosophy today," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLI (1944), 155.

<sup>18</sup> G. R. Geiger, "Can we choose between values?" *Journal of Philosophy*, XLI (1944), 292-98; P. B. Rice, "Objectivity in value judgments," *Journal of Philosophy*, XL (1943), 5; John Dewey, "Valuation judgments and immediate quality," *Journal of Philosophy*, XL (1943), 309-17, and "Some questions about value," *ibid.*, XLI (1944), 449-55; E. Benoit-Smullyan, "Value judgments and the social sciences," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLII (1945), 197-210; W. Kohler, "Value and fact," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLI (1944), 197-212; W. C. Mitchell, "Facts and values in economics," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLI (1944), 212-19; O. Lee, "Value and interest," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLII (1945), 141-61; A. Edel, "The evaluation of ideals," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLII (1945), 561-77; Mandelbaum, *Historical Knowledge*, pp. 31 and 33. H. W. Stuart, "Valuation as a logical process" (*Studies in Logical Theory*, J. Dewey [ed.] [Chicago, 1909], pp. 227-340), remains one of the clearest as well as one of the most significant of studies on this topic. Stuart and Kohler, as well as others, explode the fiction that physical and natural scientists are free from values (see also *Report*, p. 43).

no more than accept uncritically choices that others have already made." <sup>19</sup>

Since scholarship in general has renounced omniscience and has slowly, if reluctantly, adjusted to the idea that certain knowledge is unlikely, why do methodologists complain if the results of historical search are something less than perfect? Specifically, why do certain relativists labor the point that history is devoid of meaning if a fuller knowledge is impossible? Knowledge—partial, relative, conditioned—is none the less knowledge even if rigorously limited by the conditions imposed. Even opinion, so often maligned, is a type of knowledge. Some opinions, after all, are better than others. What in terms of knowledge so conditioned and limited are legitimate and realizable historical goals? Is it not reasonable to ask that the hypothetical response to this query should define the scope of the historical function?

Clearly, however, nothing is gained by confounding academic division of labor with academic particularism. The historian is not obliged to explain the cosmos,<sup>20</sup> but he cannot avoid a working knowledge of those aspects of the universe which condition his activities. It is obvious that the historical scholar cannot be an epistemologist, but it is equally obvious that he cannot elude a theory of knowledge. If specialists who cultivate this rich philosophical field warn students of man and society not to invade it,<sup>21</sup> they must assist social inquiry by sharing the harvest, by clarification, criticism, and all other kinds of co-operation. Nor will it longer suffice to assert that since knowledge of everything is beyond human realization, mastery of a smaller and smaller segment of it offers its own justification. To state such a truism in this manner is inept and misleading. The argument that we cannot know everything has induced us in practice to evade the issue of what we cannot afford to ignore if our efforts

<sup>19</sup> Geiger, *loc. cit.*, p. 292. This, in effect, is the problem Kohler seeks to solve in "Value and fact," *loc. cit.*, pp. 198 and 199; and note especially his comments concerning motivation and value, pp. 201 and 202. "Even the most disinterested historian has at least one preconception, which is the fixed idea that he had none" (Becker, p. 250). See also Teggart, pp. 4 and 65.

<sup>20</sup> Weiss, *loc. cit.*, pp. 169 and 170, and much which is in disagreement with the suggestions made above (p. 173).

<sup>21</sup> V. G. Hinshaw, Jr., "The epistemological relevance of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy*, XL (1943), 57-72; Reis and Kristeller, *loc. cit.*, pp. 244-45; F. J. Teggart, "Causation in historical events," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 19.

are to be significant. Historians cannot become psychologists, but no historian—unless he accepts an interpretation of fact no longer tenable and endorses the maxim that such facts speak for themselves—can avoid theories of human behavior, of the learning process, of the unconscious. For intellectual adequacy in the social fields an operational competence and understanding in logic and scientific method is virtually a condition precedent. The record reveals that only those scholars hostile to logic have derogated reason and sought refuge in the particular; only those scientists wary of metaphysics have exalted “pure fact” and transformed empiricism into a credo; only those social students, aping scientific procedures mistakenly conceived, have made the very phrase “value judgment” a term of scorn and have placed value itself under a scientific ban. Logic, scientific method, psychology, and metaphysics are the true auxiliaries of the historical discipline. Only scholars more concerned with prestige than with understanding will question who is auxiliary to whom.

Relativism has made value theory crucial to the success of historical scholarship. A hallowed principle of the historian's creed and a cardinal assumption of all learning must therefore be reappraised; its opposite must be restored to a level of respectability sufficient at least to make it entertainable. Given value judgments, what kinds of meanings can the historical search yield? What levels of insights and meanings are realizable? What are the limits imposed by the nature of the materials and the nature of the historian which thereby condition the nature of the quest?

The unexamined life is as worthless to the historian as to the philosopher. Both examine the compelling issues of existence, albeit on different levels, in response to the deepest inner drives as well as in response to the deepest cultural drives. But neither historians nor philosophers can afford to “become contemporary students of the past rather than historically-minded students of the present.”<sup>22</sup> In the very act of examination both are making

<sup>22</sup> Sears, *loc. cit.*, p. 148. But the plea of Sears, a persistent theme of scholars if not of scholarship, does not answer the classical objections, given classic form in modern times by Cohen (“Philosophy in wartime—an apologia,” *Faith of a Liberal*, pp. 84-92), that the scholar best serves society by remaining aloof from its most insistent problems. But no one has answered the questions “When” or “How much.” Scant help is afforded by the dictum that, “in the last analysis,” it is a matter of individual temperament. Perhaps it might not be unwise to attack the problem frontally once again. What are the uses of knowledge; what is knowledge for?



history in the act of reconstructing it, for the reconstruction provides the clues to a newer past. If philosophers continue to ask "Why" long after others have ceased to do so, the historian is forced by the very nature of history constantly to review human values, to redefine human aspirations in the cold light of the possible, and to reformulate the grounds upon which they rest. History, as Ernest Cassirer said, is fundamentally and irrevocably "anthropomorphic" and "to efface its human aspects would be to destroy its specific character and nature."<sup>23</sup> For the historian the owl of Minerva does not fly at twilight; the historian must always labor under the smarting rays of the sun, and whatever the earthly metaphor, it is a physical fact that the sun never sets.

This, in the stimulating words of John Dewey, is "a plea for the casting off of that intellectual timidity which hampers the wings of the imagination, a plea for speculative audacity, for more faith in ideas, [for] sloughing off a cowardly reliance upon those partial ideas which we are wont to give the name of facts."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> E. Cassirer, *Essay on Man* (New Haven, 1944), p. 191.

<sup>24</sup> J. Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization* (New York, 1931), 1931, p. 12. The query propounded in the *Report*—"What do we do now and how?"—a question formulated in this instance by Beard (p. 5), and one repeatedly asked since the beginning of scholarly self-examination, seems to me to be the most important statement in the book. It need hardly be said that the question cannot be answered without standards of import and value; and, if the more extreme views of relativism are granted, it cannot be answered at all.

## 6. *The Historian and His Day*\*

J. H. HEXTER

For a good while now a fairly strenuous contest has been in progress between two opposed schools of historical thought. Accepting a classification proposed by one of the keenest though most courteous of the riders in the lists, the division lies roughly between the "present-minded" and the "history-minded" historians. In the course of time many historians have joined one side or the other in the controversy with the natural consequence that there has been some sense and a good deal of nonsense talked on both sides. In general, for some subtle psychological reason that I am unable to fathom, the kind of scholar who, distrustful of "ideas" and "theories," believes that history is all "facts" has tended to take the side of the "history-minded" historians. For more obvious reasons the chronic "do-gooder," who believes that knowledge justifies itself only by a capacity to solve current problems, lines up with the "present-minded" position.

This peculiar alignment has frequently obscured the issues at stake. It is easy to expose the feebleness and absurdity of those who want only "facts" and of those who want only current problem-solving; and it is fun, too. Consequently the attacks on both sides have often been directed mainly against these vulnerable positions, and it has sometimes seemed as if the main bodies were too busy assaulting their opponents' camp followers to come to grips with one another. For, of course, there is nothing intrinsic to the history-minded position that precludes "ideas" or "theories" or, if you prefer, generalization. Nor is there anything in present-mindedness that demands an optimism as to the efficacy of history as a panacea for current social ills.

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Obviously it is not fair to judge either the history-minded or the present-minded historians by the vagaries of their respective lunatic fringes. Casting off the eccentric on both sides, there remains a real and serious divergence of opinion, as yet apparently irreconcilable, maintained on both sides by scholars whose achievements entitle their views to respectful consideration. The divergence is connected at least ostensibly with a fundamental difference in general outlook between the two parties to the argument. In a sense the present-minded are realists in the field of history, the history-minded are idealists.

The approach of the latter to the problem is essentially apodictic. They say we *ought* not to intrude our contemporary value systems and preconceptions and notions into our reconstruction of the past. They insist that it is our *duty* as historians to understand the past in its terms, not in our own; and they document their thesis with some undeniably horrible examples of what has happened in the last century to historians who looked at the past with the dubious prepossessions, current in their own day, but since invalidated or replaced by other prepossessions equally dubious. Truly there is nothing quite so passé as the intellectual fashions of yesteryear. We find them at once especially ludicrous and especially disturbing when they are worn by men of high talents. We do not like to see the nineteenth-century present-mindedness of so perceptive a man as J. R. Green transforming the roughneck barons of Runnymede into harbingers of nineteenth-century democracy and nationalism. Our embarrassment is even more acute when the victim of present-mindedness is a great historian. We are unhappy when we watch Bishop Stubbs adding Victorian liberalism to the cargo that the Anglo-Saxons brought with them to England from their North German forests. And as the conviction of sin is brought home to us we are warned, "There but for the grace of history-mindedness go you."

Convinced by the dreadful examples arrayed before us we resolve to eschew the wickedness of modernism and thenceforth hew to our obligation to be history-minded. And then a clear and chilly voice says: "But my dear fellows, you can't be history-minded. It might be nice if you could, or it might not, but in any case it is impossible. So all this pother about the obligation to be history-minded is rather silly. Only a particularly repulsive sort of Deity would bind men to do what in the very nature of things they are unable to do." So an almost medieval emphasis

on the *duty* to be history-minded is deflected by a rather Machiavellian observation as to the *facts* of life. Medieval assertions about what statemen *ought* to do Machiavelli met with assertions about what statesmen—the human animal being what it is—are *sure* to do. History-minded assertions about what historians ought to do are met with present-minded assertions of what—the history-writing animal being what he is—the historian is certain to do. The harsh fact of life is that, willy-nilly, the present-day historian lives not in the past but in the present, and this harsh fact cannot be altered by any pious resolve to be history-minded.

What we say about any historical epoch in some way reflects our experience and that experience was accumulated not in the fifteenth, in the sixteenth, or in any other century than the twentieth. When we look back on the past, we do so from the present. We are present-minded just as all earlier historians were present-minded in their day because for better or worse we happen to live in our own day. Indeed the very horrid examples cited by the proponents of history-mindedness afford irrefutable evidence that the best of former historians were in their day present-minded, and we can hardly hope to be different. So the best thing for us to do is to recognize that every generation reinterprets the past in terms of the exigencies of its own day. We can then cast aside our futile history-minded yearnings and qualms and deal with the past in terms of our day, only mildly regretting that, like all the words of man, our own words will be writ on water. By this intellectual stratagem the present-minded turn—or seek to turn—the flank of the history-minded.

We must admit, I believe, that some points in the argument of the present-minded are true beyond dispute. It is certainly true, for example, that all that we think is related to our experience somehow, and that all our experience is of our own day. But though this be true, it is also trivial. It is a plea in avoidance dressed up as an argument. Granting that we can have no experience beyond what we have acquired in the course of our own lives, the question is, does anything in that experience enable us to understand the past in its own terms rather than in terms of the prepossessions of our own day? Banal statements about the origin of our ideas in our own experience do not answer this question; they merely beg it.

In the second place, I think we must admit that in some respects all historians are present-minded, even the most deter-

mined proponents of history-mindedness. All historians are indeed engaged in rewriting past history in the light of at least one aspect of present experience, that aspect which has to do with the increments to our positive knowledge that are the fruit of scientific investigation. Consider a single example. Up to a few decades ago the Dark Ages before the twelfth century were considered an era of total regression, technological as well as political, social and cultural. Then Lefebvre de Noëttes described results of certain experiments he had made with animal power. He had reproduced antique harnesses for draft horses. In such harness the pulling power of the horse proved to be less than a quarter of what it is in modern harness. But "modern" harness, involving the use of a rigid horse collar, makes its appearance in Europe in the tenth century. So in the Dark Ages a horse could deliver about four times the tractive force that it could in antiquity. Now I am sure that no historian would suggest that we disregard Lefebvre de Noëttes' experiments in our consideration of medieval agrarian history; a fourfold increase in the efficiency of a very important source of power is something that no economic historian can afford to overlook. Yet when we do apply the results of Lefebvre's experiments to medieval agriculture we are being present-minded in at least two ways. In the first and more simple way we are rewriting the history of the Middle Ages in the light of the present because until the present the particular bit of light that was the work of Lefebvre did not exist. But we must go further. It was not pure accident that such work had not been done in earlier ages. Historians in earlier ages would not have thought of going about the investigation of medieval agriculture as Lefebvre did. In making his historical investigations by the scientific, positivist method of experiment and measurement, Lefebvre was distinctly reflecting the preoccupations of his own age and of no earlier one. Scientific-mindedness in this particular area of study at any rate is present-mindedness.

It seems to me that the proponents of history-mindedness must, and in most cases probably do, concede the validity of this kind of present-mindedness in the writing of history; and if this is all that present-mindedness means, then every historian worth his salt is present-minded. No sane contemporary scientist in his investigations of the physical world would disregard nineteenth-century advances in field theory, and no sane historian in his work would rule out of consideration insights

achieved in the past century concerning the connection of class conflict with historical occurrences. But this is only to say that all men who are professionally committed to the quest of that elusive entity—the Truth—use all the tracking devices available to them at the time, and in the nature of things cannot use any device before it exists. And of course the adequacy of the historical search at any time is in some degree limited by the adequacy of the tracking devices. In this, too, the historian's situation is no different from that of the scientist. Adequate investigation of optical isomers in organic chemistry, for example, had to wait on the development of the techniques of spectroscopy. If this is what present-mindedness means, then present-mindedness is not just the condition of historical knowledge. For *all* knowledge at any time is obviously limited by the limits of the means of gaining knowledge at that time; and historians are simply in the same boat as all others whose business it is to know.

Now I do not believe that the proponents of present-mindedness mean anything as bland and innocuous as this. On the contrary I am fairly sure they mean that the historian's boat is different from, and a great deal more leaky than, let us say, the physicist's or the geologist's boat. What then is supposed to be the *specific* trouble with the historian's boat? The trouble, as the present-minded see it, can be described fairly simply. The present-minded contend that in writing history no historian can free himself of his total experience and that that experience is inextricably involved not only in the limits of knowledge but also in the passions, prejudices, assumptions and prepossessions, in the events, crises and tensions of his own day. Therefore those passions, prejudices, assumptions, prepossessions, events, crises and tensions of the historian's own day inevitably permeate what he writes about the past. This is the crucial allegation of the present-minded, and if it is wholly correct, the issue must be settled in their favor and the history-minded pack up their apodictic and categorical-imperative baggage and depart in silence. Frequently discussions of this crucial issue have got bogged down because the history-minded keep trying to prove that the historian can counteract the influence of his own day, while the present-minded keep saying that this is utterly impossible. And of course on this question the latter are quite right. A historian has no day but his own, so what is he going to counteract it with? He is in the situation of Archimedes who

could find no fulcrum for the lever with which to move the Earth. Clearly if the historian is to be history-minded rather than present-minded he must find the means of being so in his own day, not outside it. And thus at last we come up against the crucial question—what is the historian's own day?

As soon as we put the question this way we realize that there is no ideal Historian's Day; there are many days, all different, and each with a particular historian attached to it. Now since in actuality there is no such thing as The Historian's Day, no one can be qualified to say what it actually consists of. Indeed, although I know a good number of individual historians on terms of greater or less intimacy, I would feel ill-qualified to describe with certainty what any of their days are. There is, however, one historian about whose day I can speak with assurance. For I myself am a historian at least in the technical sense of the word; I have possessed for a considerable time the parchment inscribed with the appropriate phrases to indicate that I have served my apprenticeship and am out of my indentures. So I will describe as briefly as I can my own day. I do so out of no appetite for self-revelation or self-expression, but simply because the subject is germane to our inquiry and because it is the one matter on which I happen to be the world's leading authority. Let us then hurry through this dreary journal.

I rise early and have breakfast. While eating, I glance through the morning paper and read the editorial page. I then go to the college that employs me and teach for two to four hours five days a week. Most of the time the subject matter I deal with in class is cobwebbed with age. Three fourths of it dates back from a century and a quarter to three millennia; all of it happened at least thirty years ago. Then comes lunch with a few of my colleagues. Conversation at lunch ranges widely through professional shoptalk, politics, high and ghostly matters like religion, the nature of art or the universe, and the problems of child rearing, and finally academic scuttlebutt. At present there is considerable discussion of the peculiar incongruence between the social importance of the academic and his economic reward. This topic has the merit of revealing the profound like-mindedness, transcending all occasional conflicts, of our little community. From noon to bedtime my day is grimly uniform. There are of course occasional and casual variations—preparation of the ancient material above mentioned for the next day's classes, a ride in the country with the family, a committee meeting at

college, a movie, a play, a novel, or a book by some self-anointed Deep Thinker. Still by and large from one in the afternoon to midnight with time out for dinner and domestic matters, I read things written between 1450 and 1650 or books written by historians on the basis of things written between 1450 and 1650. I vary the routine on certain days by writing about what I have read on the other days. On Saturdays and in the summer I start my reading or writing at nine instead of at noon. It is only fair to add that most days I turn on a news broadcast or two at dinnertime, and that I spend an hour or two with the Sunday paper.

Now I am sure that many people will consider so many days so spent to be a frightful waste of precious time; and indeed, as most of the days of most men, it does seem a bit trivial. Be that as it may, it remains one historian's own day. It is his own day in the only sense that phrase can be used without its being pretentious, pompous and meaningless. For a man's own days are not everything that happens in the world while he lives and breathes. As I write, portentous and momentous things are no doubt being done in Peiping, Teheran, Bonn, and Lost Nation, Iowa. But these things are no part of my day; they are outside of my experience, and though one or two of them may faintly impinge on my consciousness tomorrow via the headlines in the morning paper, that is probably as far as they will get. At best they are likely to remain fluttering fragments on the fringe of my experience, not well-ordered parts of it. I must insist emphatically that the history I write is, as the present-minded say, intimately connected with my own day and inextricably linked with my own experience; but I must insist with even stronger emphasis that my day is not someone else's day, or the ideal Day of Contemporary Man; it is just the way I happen to dispose of twenty-four hours. By the same token the experience that is inextricably linked to any history I may happen to write is not the ideal Experience of Twentieth-Century Man in World Chaos, but just the way I happen to put in my time over the series of my days.

Now it may seem immodest or perhaps simply fantastic to take days spent as are mine—days so little attuned to the great harmonies, discords and issues of the present—and hold them up for contemplation. Yet I will dare to suggest that in this historian's own humdrum days there is one peculiarity that merits thought. The peculiarity lies in the curious relation that days



so squandered seem to establish between the present and a rather remote sector of the past. I do not pretend that I am wholly unconcerned by the larger public issues and catastrophes of the present. After all I will never be called upon to testify to the purity of my doctrine before the Papal Inquisition of the sixteenth century; but I might be required to do so by less powerfully armed inquests of 1954. Nor am I without opinions on a large number of contemporary issues. On some of them I am vigorously dogmatic as, indeed, are most of the historians I know. Yet my knowledge about such issues, although occasionally fairly extensive, tends to be haphazard, vague, unsystematic and disorderly. And the brute fact of the matter is that even if I had the inclination, I do not have the time to straighten that knowledge out, at least except at the cost of alterations in the ordering of my days that I am not in the least inclined to undertake.

So for a small part of my day I live under a comfortable rule of bland intellectual irresponsibility vis-à-vis the Great Issues of the Contemporary World, a rule that permits me to go off half-cocked with only slight and occasional compunction. But during most of my day—that portion of it that I spend in dealing with the Great and Not-So-Great Issues of the World between 1450 and 1650—I live under an altogether different rule. The commandments of that rule are:

1. Do not go off half cocked.
2. Get the story straight.
3. Keep prejudices about present-day issues out of this area.

The commandments are counsels of perfection, but they are not merely that; they are enforced by sanctions, both external and internal. The serried array of historical trade journals equipped with extensive book review columns provides the most powerful external sanction. The columns are often at the disposal of cantankerous cranks ever ready to expose to obloquy "pamphleteers" who think that Clio is an "easy bought mistress bound to suit her ways to the intellectual appetites of the current customer."<sup>1</sup> On more than one occasion I have been a cantankerous crank. When I write about the period between 1450 and 1650 I am well aware of a desire to give unto others no occasion to do unto me as I have done unto some of them.

The reviewing host seems largely to have lined up with the history-minded. This seems to be a consequence of their training.

<sup>1</sup> *American Historical Review*, LI (1946), 487.

Whatever the theoretical biases of their individual members, the better departments of graduate study in history do not encourage those undergoing their novitiate to resolve research problems by reference to current ideological conflicts. Consequently most of us have been conditioned to feel that it is not quite proper to characterize John Pym as a liberal, or Thomas More as a socialist, or Niccolò Macchiavelli as a proto-Fascist, and we tend to regard this sort of characterization as at best a risky pedagogic device. Not only the characterization but the thought process that leads to it lie under a psychological ban; and thus to the external sanction of the review columns is added the internal sanction of the still small voice that keeps saying, "We really shouldn't do it that way."<sup>2</sup>

The austere rule we live under as historians has some curious consequences. In my case one of the consequences is that my knowledge of the period around the sixteenth century in Europe is of a rather different order than my knowledge about current happenings. Those preponderant segments of my own day spent in the discussion, investigation and contemplation of that remote era may not be profitably spent but at least they are spent in an orderly, systematic, purposeful way. The contrast can be pointed up by a few details. I have never read the Social Security Act, but I have read the Elizabethan Poor Law in all its successive versions and moreover I have made some study of its application. I have never read the work of a single existentialist but I have read Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* from cover to cover. I know practically nothing for sure about the relation of the institutions of higher education in America to the social structure, but I know a fair bit about the relation between the two in France, England and the Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I have never studied the Economic Reports to the President that would enable me to appraise the state of the American nation in 1950, but I have studied closely Hale's *Discourse of the Commonwealth of England* and derived from it some reasonable coherent notions about the condition of England around 1550. Now the

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<sup>2</sup>I do not for a moment intend to suggest that current dilemmas have not suggested *problems* for historical investigation. It is obvious that such dilemmas are among the numerous and entirely legitimate points of origin of historical study. The actual issue, however, has nothing to do with the point of origin of historical studies, but with the mode of treatment of historical problems.

consequence of all this is inevitable. Instead of the passions, prejudices, assumptions and prepossessions, the events, crises and tensions of the present dominating my view of the past, *it is the other way about*. The passions, prejudices, assumptions and prepossessions, the events, crises and tensions of early modern Europe to a very considerable extent lend precision to my rather haphazard notions about the present. I make sense of present-day welfare-state policy by thinking of it in connection with the "commonwealth" policies of Elizabeth. I do the like with respect to the contemporary struggle for power and conflict of ideologies by throwing on them such light as I find in the Catholic-Calvinist struggle of the sixteenth century.

I am frequently made aware of the peculiarities of my perspective when I teach. The days of my students are very different from mine. They have spent little time indeed in contemplating the events of the sixteenth century. So when I tell them that the Christian Humanists, in their optimistic aspiration to reform the world by means of education, were rather like our own progressive educators, I help them understand the Christian Humanists. But my teaching strategy moves in the opposite direction from my own intellectual experience. The comparison first suggested itself to me as a means for understanding not Christian Humanism but progressive education. There is no need to labor this point. After all, ordinarily the process of thought is from the better known to the worse known, and in some respects I know a good bit more about the sixteenth century than I do about the twentieth. Perhaps there is nothing to be said for this peculiar way of thinking; it may be altogether silly; but in the immediate context I am not obliged to defend it. I present it simply as one of those brute facts of life dear to the heart of the present-minded. It is in fact one way that one historian's day affects his judgment.

In the controversy that provided the starting point of this rambling essay, the essential question is sometimes posed with respect to the relation of the historian to his own *day*. In other instances it is posed with respect to his relation to his own *time*. Having discovered how idiosyncratic was the day of one historian we may inquire whether his time is also peculiar. The answer is, "Yes, his time is a bit odd." And here it is possible to take a welcome leave of the first person singular. For, although my day is peculiar to me, my time, as a historian, is like the time of other historians.

For our purposes the crucial fact about the ordinary time of all men, even of historians in their personal as against their professional capacity, is that in no man's time is he *really* sure what is going to happen next. This is true, obviously, not only of men of the present time but also of all men of all past times. Of course there are large routine areas of existence in which we can make pretty good guesses; and if this were not so, life would be unbearable. Thus, my guess, five evenings a week in term time, that I will be getting up the following morning to teach classes at my place of employment provides me with a useful operating rule; yet it has been wrong occasionally, and will be wrong again. With respect to many matters more important, all is uncertain. Will there be war or peace next year? Will my children turn out well or ill? Will I be alive or dead thirty years hence? three years hence? tomorrow?

The saddest words of tongue or pen may be, "It might have been." The most human are, "If I had only known." But it is precisely characteristic of the historian that he does know. He is really sure what is going to happen next, not in his time as a pilgrim here below, but in his own time as a historian. The public servant Conyers Read, for example, when he worked high in the councils of the Office of Strategic Services did not know what the outcome of the maneuvers he helped plan would be. But for all the years from 1568 during which he painstakingly investigated the career of Francis Walsingham, the eminent Tudor historian Conyers Read knew that the Spanish Armada would come against England and that the diplomatic maneuvers of Mr. Secretary Walsingham would assist in its defeat. Somewhat inaccurately we might say that while man's time ordinarily is oriented to the future, the historian's time is oriented to the past. It might be better to say that while men are ordinarily trying to connect the present with a future that is to be, the historian connects his present with a future that has already been.

The professional historian does not have a monopoly of his peculiar time, or rather, as Carl Becker once put it, every man is on occasion his own historian. But the historian alone lives systematically in the historian's own time. And from what we have been saying it is clear that this time has a unique dimension. Each man in his own time tries to discover the motives and the causes of the actions of those people he has to deal with; and the historian does the like with varying degrees of success.

But, as other men do not and cannot, the historian knows something of the results of the acts of those he deals with: this is the unique dimension of the historian's time. If, in saying that the historian cannot escape his own time, the present-minded meant this peculiarly historical time—which they do not—they would be on solid ground. For the circumstances are rare indeed in which the historian has no notion whatever of the outcome of the events with which he is dealing. The very fact that he is a historian and that he has interested himself in a particular set of events fairly assures that at the outset he will have some knowledge of what happened afterward.

This knowledge makes it impossible for the historian to do merely what the history-minded say he should do—consider the past in its own terms, and envisage events as the men who lived through them did. Surely he should try to do that; just as certainly he must do more than that simply because he knows about those events what none of the men contemporary with them knew; he knows what their consequences were. To see the events surrounding the obscure monk Luther as Leo X saw them—as another “monks’ quarrel” and a possible danger to the perquisites of the Curia—may help us understand the peculiar inefficacy of Papal policy at the time; but that does not preclude the historian from seeing the same events as the decisive step toward the final breach of the religious unity of Western Civilization. We may be quite sure however that nobody at the time, not even Luther himself, saw those events that way. The historian who resolutely refused to use the insight that his own peculiar time gave him would not be superior to his fellows; he would be merely foolish, betraying a singular failure to grasp what history is. For history is a becoming, an ongoing, and it is to be understood not only in terms of what comes before but also of what comes after.

What conclusions can we draw from our cursory examination of the historian's own time and his own day? What of the necessity, alleged by the present-minded, of rewriting history anew each generation? In some respects the estimate is over-generous; in one respect too niggardly. The necessity will in part be a function of the lapsed time between the events written about and the present. The history of the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 may indeed need to be written over a number of times in the next few generations as its consequences more completely unfold. But this is not true of the Treaty of Madrid of 1527. Its

consequences for better or worse pretty well finished their unfolding a good while back. The need for rewriting history is also a function of the increase in actual data on the thing to be written about. Obviously any general estimate of the rate of increase of such data would be meaningless. History also must be rewritten as the relevant and usable knowledge about man, about his ways and his waywardness, increases. Here again there has been a tendency to exaggerate the speed with which that knowledge is increasing. The hosannahs that have greeted many "master ideas" about man during the past fifty years seem more often than not to be a reflection of an urge toward secular salvation in a shaky world rather than a precise estimate of the cognitive value of the ideas in question. Frequently such "master ideas" have turned out to be plain old notions in new fancy dress, or simply wrong. Perhaps the imperative, felt by the present-minded, to rewrite history every generation is less the fruit of a real necessity than of their own attempts to write it always in conformity with the latest intellectual mode. A little less haste might mean a little more speed. For the person engaged in the operation it is all too easy to mistake for progress a process that only involves skipping from recent to current errors.

If, instead of asking how often history *must* or ought to be rewritten, we ask how often it *will* be rewritten, the answer is that it will be rewritten, as it always has been, from day to day. This is so because the rewriting of history is inescapably what each working historian in fact does in his own day. That is precisely how he puts in his time. We seek new data. We reexamine old data to discover in them relations and connections that our honored predecessors may have missed. Onto these data we seek to bring to bear whatever may seem enlightening and relevant out of our own day. And what may be relevant is as wide as the full range of our own daily experience, intellectual, aesthetic, political, social, personal. Some current event may, of course, afford a historian an understanding of what men meant five hundred years ago when they said that a prince must rule through *amour et tremeur*, love and fear. But then so might his perusal of a socio-psychological investigation into the ambivalence of authority in Papua. So might his reading of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. And so might his relations with his own children.

For each historian brings to the rewriting of history the full

## 7. *The Historian and History*\*

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.

The word "historian" is a relatively unambiguous word. It means simply a man who tries to write history. But the word "history" is thoroughly ambiguous. It may refer to events which have taken place in the past; or it may refer to the written record of those events. The historian therefore has a double relationship—to the actual experience, and to the subsequent record of the experience. The problem to which I address myself here is the interaction between history, in both senses, and the historian.

Let us look first at the unambiguous factor in the equation. In our time, the historian tends to be a professional. He is a man trained in his craft, a product of methodical discipline, a member of a guild. His is a quasi-priestly vocation, supposed to liberate him from the passions of his day, to assure him a serenity of perspective and to consecrate him to the historian's classical ideal of objectivity. His creed has been well stated by Walter Lippmann, who once observed that no crisis in human affairs was unique or ultimate:

The world will go on somehow, and more crises will follow. It will go on best, however, if among us there are men who have stood apart, who refused to be anxious or too much concerned, who were cool and inquiring and had their eyes on a longer past and a longer future. By their example they can remind us that the passing moment is only a moment; by their loyalty they will have cherished those things which only the disinterested mind can use.

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The phrase "the disinterested mind" suggests the essence of the professional historian's vows. His commitment is to history-as-record, not to history-as-experience, to writing history rather than making it.

It should be noted that this professionalization of the historical craft—this isolation from actual events—is a recent development. In earlier times, there was by no means so rigorous a bar against the chronicler's being also a participant. "The captain of Hampshire Grenadiers," wrote Gibbon, "was not useless to the historian of the Roman Empire." Indeed, until the last half of the nineteenth century, the great historians were, in one way or another, captains of Hampshire Grenadiers. Macaulay, Bancroft, Guizot, Carlyle, Parkman, Henry Adams—all were men for whom the history they wrote was a derivation from the experiences they enjoyed or endured. Latterly we have come to fear that such experience is incompatible with the ideal of "the disinterested mind." This question seems to be worth reexamination.

Historians ought always to make their presuppositions as explicit as possible; and I am bound therefore to declare my own interest. I write as one who, after many years of writing history, has recently had the opportunity to watch history in the making. I have often asked myself whether this experience is likely to strengthen or to corrupt one's purpose as an historian—whether exposure to history-as-experience will improve one's ability to produce history-as-record, or whether it will sever one irrevocably from the ideal of "the disinterested mind." I am by no means sure of the answer to this question—and would only submit now some tentative observations.

The dangers of involvement are self-evident. To act is, in many cases, to give hostages—to parties, to policies, to persons. Participation spins a web of commitments which may imprison the chronicler in invisible fetters. Macaulay was forever a Whig, Bancroft a Jacksonian, Adams an Adams; and their histories became the servant of their loyalties. It is only a partial answer to say that the historian is thus imprisoned in any case; that visible commitment serves at least to alert the reader, while the ostensibly uncommitted historian is left free to shoot from ambush. For the process of involvement does tend to systematize what might otherwise be only vague and fitful inclinations.

Yet involvement has its benefits—and many of these also are self-evident. To take part in public affairs, to smell the dust and



sweat of battle, is surely to stimulate and amplify the historical imagination. I have often wondered at those who strive to write about great historical crises like the American Civil War on the assumption that the burning emotions of the day were invalid (though, to be fair to the Civil War revisionists, they condemn mainly the emotions of those who regarded slavery as an evil to be abolished, while cheerfully accepting the validity of the emotions of the slaveholder). Participation in the actuality of history leaves the historian no doubt that mass emotions are realities with which he no less than the statesman must deal. Far from being gratuitous and artificial, as the revisionist historians once tried to tell us, the way people feel is an organic part of the stuff of history.

Involvement also increases the historian's knowledge of the operational problems of public policy. The observer who once witnesses the making of decisions under pressure is unlikely ever to write the same disdainful way about the agonizing of Madison in 1812 or Lincoln in 1861 or Wilson in 1917 or Roosevelt in 1941. It is not a particularly difficult trick to say what ought to have been done when you know how the story came out; but, despite E. H. Carr, hindsight is not the safest principle on which to base the writing of history. And involvement not only makes the historian understand a good deal more about the trauma of choice; it also teaches him to distrust a good deal of the evidence on which the historian's reconstruction of that choice is likely to rest.

Nothing in my own recent experience has been more chastening than the attempt to penetrate into the process of decision. I shudder a little when I think how confidently I have analyzed decisions in the ages of Jackson and Roosevelt, traced influences, assigned motives, evaluated roles, allocated responsibilities and, in short, transformed a dishevelled and murky evolution into a tidy and ordered transaction. The sad fact is that, in many cases, the basic evidence for the historian's reconstruction of the really hard cases does not exist—and the evidence that does exist is often incomplete, misleading or erroneous.

Memoranda pro and con cannot necessarily be relied on for an adequate description of the dynamics of decision—or sometimes even for an adequate definition of the genuine issues. Diaries are *ex parte* evidence, designed, consciously or not, to dignify the diarist, and to dish his opponents. Memory is all too often hopelessly treacherous. As for newspaper or magazine

accounts, they are sometimes worse than useless when they purport to give the inside history of decisions; their relation to reality is often considerably less than the shadows in Plato's cave. I have too often seen the most conscientious reporters attribute to government officials views the exact opposite of which the officials are advocating within the government to make it possible for me to take the testimony of journalism in such matters seriously again.

For historians of the twentieth century, the problem is compounded by the technological revolution—in particular, by the invention of the typewriter and the telephone. In the good old days, statesmen, quill pen in hand, could write only a limited number of letters. When they had something of significance to communicate, paper was the only means—save face-to-face conversation—of communication. In our time, the typewriter has vastly increased the flow of paper, while the telephone has vastly reduced its importance. Far more documents are produced—and there is far less in them. If a statesman in the twentieth century has something of significance to communicate, if speed and secrecy are of the essence, he will confide his message, not to a letter, but to the telephone. Electronic waves, alas, leave few traces.

But, though the technological revolution complicates the historian's problem of finding out what actually occurred, it does not create that problem. The certitude with which historians are accustomed to pin down the past often results, I suspect, from the convenient fact that there are no survivors to challenge our reconstruction. The historian of the past is, in a sense, little more than the contemporary historian whose witnesses are dead—and who therefore can write without fear of rebuttal. It is not only, as historians like to think, that the passage of time produces more evidence or greater objectivity. It may be too that the passage of time buries those who might otherwise be able to correct or refute the historian out of personal experience.

Sir Walter Raleigh combined as few men have the roles of chronicler and participant; few historians have had to suffer the ultimate criticism of the executioner's ax. I now understand more poignantly than ever before Raleigh's warning in the preface to "*The History of the World*." The historian, Raleigh suggested, is dedicated to truth; "there is no mistress or guide that hath led her followers and servants into greater miseries." The historian of antiquity, pursuing truth too far off, "loseth

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her sight, and loseth himself; and he that walks after [truth] at a middle distance, I know not whether I should call that kind of course temper or baseness. . . . [But] whosoever, in writing a modern history, shall follow truth too near the heels, it may haply strike out his teeth."

Only when truth can no longer rise and strike out the historian's teeth is the historian safe—and only then can he remold the past into the desired shape of crystalline lucidity. The passion for tidiness is the historian's occupational disease. Yet the really hard cases tend to be inherently untidy. A case is hard when it confronts men with difficult choices; and choices are difficult when no preconceived solution applies. At such times, those most responsible must of necessity look at the problem from all sides—and often first from one side, then from another. They engage in a collective exercise of thinking aloud, out of which, with luck and leadership, a consensus may emerge. General Marshall used to say that battlefield decisions are taken in conditions of "chronic obscurity"—that is, under undue pressure and on the basis of inadequate information. This is probably the character of most critical decisions in the field of public policy. The historian who comes along later revolts against "chronic obscurity" and tries to tidy everything up. In this way, he often imputes pattern and design to a process which, in its nature, is organic and not mechanical. Historians presumably reject the conspiratorial interpretation of history; but, in a benign way, they often become its unconscious proponents, ascribing to premeditation what belongs to fortuity and to purpose what belongs to chance.

I do not mean to counsel defeatism in this matter. Tendencies can of course be discerned and identified; and a sequence of decisions may supply the evidence for a clear delineation of conflicting programs and policies. But I do doubt whether specific historical episodes can always be reconstructed with the glib exactitude to which historians are sometimes professionally addicted—and I write as one who has sinned more than most.

This recital does not directly answer the question whether involvement in public affairs will corrupt "the disinterested mind." It does perhaps suggest that too rigorous non-involvement may tempt the historian into imposing an excessively rational order on the contingency and obscurity of historical reality. It suggests too that systematic non-involvement may deny

the historian clues and insights which could enrich his understanding of the historical process. Involvement may prompt him to ask new questions which open up fertile new possibilities for the profession to explore. I think of Leonard D. White's notable series on the administrative history of the American government as an example—a series produced in answer to a question which had not occurred to several generations of American historians but which did occur to a former member of the Civil Service Commission: How did the thing actually work? And obviously the early economic history of the United States needs to be rewritten in terms of questions arising from our contemporary knowledge of the processes of economic and social development. Historians, in any case, deal more appropriately in questions than in answers. One remembers the dying Gertrude Stein asking her friend, "What is the answer?" and, when she received no reply, saying, "In that case, what is the question?" This should be the historian's creed.

In short, if involvement has its hazards, it also offers its compensations. It may well be more likely than non-involvement to convince the historian of the precariousness of his calling and to bring him to a proper humility before the welter of the past. "The disinterested mind," in any case, is an ideal, not an actuality—and, as the case of Thucydides suggests, it may be more a consequence of temperament than of a preference for the ivory tower over the barricades.

The brush with history-as-experience has therefore given this particular historian a greater skepticism about the feasibility of history-as-record. At the same time, I must add that it has also given me a greater confidence in the utility of the writing of history for the making of history. For there is a two-way relationship between the two forms of history. One must consider not only the impact of history-as-experience on the chronicler but the impact of history-as-record on the participant.

Here my recent experience has given me a strong and unclouded view. I have always been among those who believe that history should be studied for its own sake, not as a guide to the present or a blueprint for the future. I have always questioned the instrumentalist view of history—the notion that knowledge of the past guarantees superior wisdom in making present and future choices. I still am quite sure that the historian is not inherently better qualified than anyone else to offer counsel in the field of public policy. But I have no doubt

at all that the significant statesman must have a knowledge of history, an instinct for the grand tendencies, a feeling for the direction in which the world is moving—he must have his own conception of the nature of the historical process.

His sense of history may be voluntarist or determinist, optimistic or pessimistic, plausible or absurd; but it must exist. He must be possessed by some vision which connects the past and the future and gives his decisions a setting and a point. Surely the great leaders of our own time have had a sense of history. For some, that sense of history has been malign—as in Hitler's nightmare vision of an implacable evolution toward the world of the Master Race; or in Lenin's iron prophecy of a world moving through predestined stages to the predestined conclusion of a universal, monolithic Communist society. For others, the sense of history has been classic—as in de Gaulle's magnificent faith against all temptations of ideology or international organization in the ultimate reality of the nation-state; or in Churchill's chivalrous view of a world where gallant captains battle to keep alive the values of decency and honor.

For our great American leaders, I think, the sense of history has been characteristically flexible and generous, tolerant of diversity and discord, contemptuous of dogma and ideology, skeptical of determinism, delighted by the idea of a changing world in an unfinished universe, yet committed to the abiding purposes of freedom and justice enunciated in the basic charters of our republic. This was the vision which animated Theodore Roosevelt, with his conviction that America must rise to the challenges of industrial and international power—Woodrow Wilson, with his hope for a world community—Franklin Roosevelt, with his conception of a mixed society, combining individual freedom and social responsibility, in an interdependent world. Our President today is fully in this tradition—a practicing historian, like Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson, endowed, like Franklin Roosevelt, with a strong and spacious instinct for the future. I have no doubt that his sense of the character and direction of history—his conviction that the world is moving, not toward some preordained and unitary future, but, if we will it so, toward a diversity of national systems bound together by social progress, respect for the rights of others and loyalty to the international community—strengthens his purpose and fortifies his resolve in his moments of hard decision.

The conclusion is twofold. If exposure to history-as-experience

may lead the historian to doubt a little the precision of history-as-record, it also persuades him that history-as-record forms a basic part of the intellectual climate which shapes the actual unfolding of history in the future—that a sense of history is the indispensable underpinning of statesmanship.

It further persuades this historian that monistic and deterministic visions of history are, except in some broad and trivial sense, wrong—that the sense of history possessed by the great American leadership of our century, based on the belief in the reality of choice and the plurality of existence, is much more in the grain of the turning world; and that William James was right in saying:

The great point is that the possibilities are really *here*. Whether it be we who solve them, or He working through us, at those soul-trying moments when fate's scales seem to quiver and good snatches the victory from evil or shrinks nerveless from the fight, is of small account, so long as we admit that the issue is decided nowhere else than *here* and *now*. *That* is what gives the palpitating reality to our moral life and makes it tingle . . . with so strange and elaborate an excitement. This reality, this excitement, are what the determinisms, hard and soft alike, suppress by their denial that *anything* is decided here and now, and their dogma that all things were foredoomed and settled long ago.

If it be so, may you and I then have been foredoomed to the error of continuing to believe in liberty.

## PART THREE

### The History of American History— Turner and Beard

#### *Introductory Notes*

"The history of a civilization, if intelligently conceived, may be an instrument of civilization." These are the words with which Charles A. Beard and his wife, Mary R. Beard, opened their magisterial survey, *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927). History serves in many ways. A statement of self-consciousness, it portrays identity. Recording the course of the past but mindful of the direction of the future, it charts the arrival point of the present. History makes the balance sheet in the accounting of national goals and purposes.

American historical writing has served our civilization as a particularly useful instrument. Two related concerns have dominated American history: our purpose as a nation and our identity with regard to Europe. Our successive wars and social movements have been efforts to bring national life into accord with national ideals. And, in the progress of American life, we have always measured the worth of our institutions and ideas in terms of the worth of the institutions and ideas of Europe. In this sense, the writing of American history has been nothing so much as a dialogue on values in which, whether explicitly or tacitly, one of the participants has been the Old World.

Puritan history, for example, was a defense of the American's errand into the wilderness; and its most notable effort and the greatest single work of Puritan history, Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, undertook "to offer unto the Churches of the Reformation, abroad in the World, some small Memorials, that may be serviceable unto the Designs of Reformations, whereto . . . they are quickly to be awakened." The historians of the young republic—David Ramsay, Mercy Otis Warren, John Marshall, to name a few—saw the Revolution very much as Publius had seen it in *The Federalist* papers, in which he rejected "the impious doctrine" of the Old World and hailed the leaders of the Revolution: "Happily for America, happily, we trust, for the whole human race, they pursued a new and more noble course. . . . To this manly spirit, posterity will be indebted for the possession, and the world for the example, of the numerous innovations displayed on the American theatre, in favor of private rights and public happiness."

The middle decades of the nineteenth century saw the publication of what is still the single most important account of the American past, George Bancroft's ten-volume *History of the United States*. Bancroft's object was, as we have seen, "to follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory." In the age of Tocqueville, Napoleon III, and Bismarck, the *History* celebrated the triumph of liberty in the new world.

During the later decades of the nineteenth century, historical writing became almost exclusively the province of professional historians, men who were being trained in the new graduate schools that had recently come into existence. The more significant centers of professional graduate study included Johns Hopkins, Michigan, Cornell, Harvard, and Columbia. Working under a "scientific" ideal, by which they aspired to impartiality and a disinterested appraisal of the past, the new historians were oriented in the basic elements of professional training: using source materials critically, doing individual research and working cooperatively in the seminar, publishing their findings in monographic studies for the benefit of a growing world of historical scholarship. The rise of a gild of experts was signalized by the organization, in 1884, of the American Historical Association, and by the appearance, in 1895, of the first issue of the gild's journal, *The American Historical Review*.



But if American historians had come under a "scientific" ideal and had become professionals and experts, it nowhere meant that history would no longer be "an instrument of civilization" or that its social uses would be abjured. Surely this was not the conviction of two of the most prominent historians of that generation, Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles A. Beard. Turner believed "that good citizenship demands the careful study of history" and that, if the citizen looked at present problems from the perspective of the past, history could "hold the lamp for conservative reform." Beard's four years of study in Europe had made him keenly aware of national social problems resulting from industrialization, and he learned much in particular from his contact with reform groups in Britain, including the Christian socialists, the Fabians, and the new British Labor Party. Beard was a political scientist as well as a historian, a publicist as well as a scholar, a student of the past with an encompassing interest in the present. He was an active supporter of James Harvey Robinson's *New History*, which proposed to use the past for the cause of social justice and human betterment. The history text on which they collaborated, *The Development of Modern Europe* (two volumes, 1907-1908), was designed "to enable the reader to catch up with his own times; to read intelligently the foreign news in the morning paper. . . ."

Firm believers in the use of history as an instrument of civilization, Turner and Beard postulated grand hypotheses about the American past which distilled American experience, identified American character, and pointed out the road America had traveled to arrive at the present state of its issues and problems. Turner suggested that American development could best be understood in terms of the continuous and varied influence of the frontier; Beard suggested that it could be understood in terms of economic factors, particularly the interests of the dominant social groups. Both men fundamentally shaped the historical writing of their generation; on the rock of their hypotheses, major schools of historical thought and writing were raised. Their ideas were articulated in countless monographs: challenged and debated, they percolated through countless textbooks and filtered into popular thought.

Significantly, both men identified America for their generation, and defined its features vis-à-vis Europe. Turner, reacting against a school of history which related American institutions

and ideas to those of Europe, asserted that ours had been essentially unique and that this uniqueness could be attributed to the democratizing effects of the American frontier. As for Beard, to cite the words of a long-time friend of his, George S. Counts, he "abhorred Europe's interminable wars, long-cherished hatreds, and colonial adventures." A devoted patriot, he felt that criticizing American shortcomings was a mark of loyalty, a necessary step in setting right an ideal that had gone wrong. His *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913) was a commentary not only on the motives that accounted for the kind of democracy that the Founding Fathers had erected, but also on the perversions of the democratic ideal which existed under the aegis of a property-minded Supreme Court in his own times. Sons of the middle border, both Turner and Beard, in their respective definitions of what America had been, sought to provide a clue for understanding present problems and for resolving them.

The essays that follow help us to understand the achievement of the generation of Turner and Beard, an achievement on which much of our own historical work and writing squarely rests. Edward N. Saveth deals with the attempt of historians, during that generation and since, to formulate general concepts regarding the course of American experience: at one point, they explored the possibilities of a science of history; at another, they proposed larger hypotheses about American development; and more recently they have tried to use the newer methods of social science. Professor Saveth, who teaches at the New School for Social Research, has had a long-standing interest in American historical writing. His works include *American Historians and European Immigrants, 1875-1925* (1948), *Understanding the American Past* (1954), and *American History and the Social Sciences* (1964). Ray Allen Billington's essay deals with Turner's frontier hypothesis, its central arguments, its inadequacies, its enduring validity. Professor Billington had taught for many years at Northwestern University before becoming, in 1963, Senior Research Associate at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California. His major writings are *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (1938), *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (1949), and *The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860* (1956).

Richard Hofstadter's essay explores several basic aspects of Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*: the

social and intellectual climate in which Beard wrote it, his methodology, his primary aim in writing the book, and the subsequent development of his thought on the Founding Fathers and the Constitution. Some years after Hofstadter's essay appeared, Robert E. Brown of Michigan State University brought out his study of *Charles Beard and the Constitution* (1956), in which Beard's methods were heavily attacked. Despite the serious shortcomings in Beard's use of these methods, much remains to be said about Beard's sense that they might open up a new understanding of how and why the Constitution was drawn up. This is the point Hofstadter is making in the second part of the essay. De Witt Clinton Professor of American History at Columbia University, Hofstadter has, in his many books, brought a keen intelligence and a fresh viewpoint to the study of the American past. His most important writings are: *The American Political Tradition* (1948); *The Age of Reform* (1955), which won the Pulitzer prize in history; and *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), which won a second Pulitzer prize award.

In our own day, American civilization has taken yet another turn, and history, serving as an instrument, has yielded yet another sense of who we are and what we have been. A significant commentary on both the function of history and its particular message for our times was offered by Samuel Flagg Bemis, Sterling Professor Emeritus of Diplomatic History and Inter-American Relations at Yale University, in December 1961, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association. History extends "our experience, individually and universally, back beyond the touch of our lifetime" and "fortifies our judgment in dealing with problems of the present and measuring our hopes for the future. . . ." The major problem of the present as Professor Bemis saw it, was the threat of world communism and in the face of this threat it was clear to him that our history was to be read in terms of the blessings of liberty: these were "the original *raison d'être* of our nation . . . the values for which the United States has stood throughout its history in the shifting configurations of power and politics in the world of nations."

Professor Bemis's view is one in a long succession. Looking backward from our own age to that of Turner and Beard, and thence to Bancroft, the early national historians, and the Puritans, we can see that our history has given our succeeding gener-

ations different, yet related, answers to the same questions about our identity as a people, our purpose, our failure, and our achievement.

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## 8. *A Science of American History*\*

EDWARD N. SAVETH

The prospect of a science of history that would chart the past and enable the future to be projected has invariably intrigued the historian. Technically, this would leave history unencumbered by its mass and the historian concerned only with lines of development delineated by historical science. With the road map of the future before him, the status of the historian would grow as indispensable counselor of politicians and statesmen, bringing the science of human development to bear upon their deliberations. Henry Adams imagined a situation in which state and church, capital and labor, and all other important social groupings and institutions would ask anxiously of the historian: Am I justified in history and will I live on?

The movement toward a science of history, which had its most significant development toward the last two decades of the nineteenth century, coincided with the professionalization of historical study. Throughout most of the nineteenth century and before, history had been the province of those who regarded it as primarily a branch of literature. The best of the literary historians did no injustice to the muse, since they were as discriminate in their use of sources as they were careful in their stylistic presentation. The last quarter of the century witnessed the development of professionally trained American historians, many of whom attended German graduate schools. These historians were inclined to associate the development of a science of history with the growth of professional prestige and aspired to a utilitarian history in an increasingly practical era. They were

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less interested in attracting and entertaining a relatively large reading public than were their predecessors, such as Francis Parkman and William Hickling Prescott. Indeed, the strain of romanticism which had attracted the public to early nineteenth-century historiography was considered by the professional historian to be superfluous, if not unsuited, to a scientific era.

Scientific historiography had broader ambitions than narrative pace, dramatic presentation, or a large readership—goals considered somewhat unimportant compared to the discovery of a law, such as Darwin's in biology, that would unify all human history.

Although the heyday of scientific history was the late nineteenth century, the belief that there was law in history, even if not necessarily scientific law, existed earlier. George Bancroft wrote of God as manifest in American history, and national destiny as controlled by His law. "The movements of humanity are governed by law," Bancroft said, and "the character of science attaches to our pursuits." Even in the literary histories of Parkman and John Lothrop Motley, the triumph of the Anglo-Saxon, the Protestant, and democracy over the non-Anglo-Saxon, the Catholic, and monarchism was, if not exactly determined by historical law, inherent in the unfolding of events.

Toward the middle of the century, the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and Auguste Comte began to influence American historiography and made themselves apparent, particularly in the work of Richard Hildreth, John W. Draper, and, somewhat later, Henry Adams. Hildreth's *History of the United States, 1497-1789*, which was published around 1851, was background for a more comprehensive effort to create "an Inductive Science of Man" in accordance with the principles of Benthamite utilitarianism. Comte's positivism and Henry T. Buckle's theory of the relation between environment and human evolution had important influence upon John W. Draper's *Intellectual Development of Europe* as well as on Draper's work in American history.

The scientific historiography of the late nineteenth century reflected these earlier patterns. John W. Burgess, with a doctorate from Göttingen and an interest in scientific history, wrote of God's will in history manifest in the victory of the North in the Civil War. The Newtonian universe of John Fiske, who was a popularizer of scientific history, if somewhat more complex than the world which "the Lord's Remembrancers" described

for Puritan readers, was nonetheless "Providentially" determined. Fiske's God was a master mechanic governing through natural law rather than by direct, personal intervention, as did the God of the Puritan historians. The Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and democrat were no less triumphant in the deterministic sequences of these writers than in the more leisurely teleology of Parkman and Motley. Certain hypotheses which were applied to American history by scientific historians during the twentieth century—regionalism, sectionalism, and geographic determinism; the frontier theory; economic determinism—were at least anticipated by earlier nineteenth-century historians. Finally, fact-finding and the intelligent, accurate, and discriminate use of sources, essentials of scientific historiography, were not altogether wanting in earlier American historiography.

But there were also important differences between the older historiography and the newer scientific pattern which grew out of the cumulative impact of developments in nineteenth-century science. Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, Lamarck's theory of development, and Von Baer's law in embryology were preliminary to Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), which rooted man in nature and biological evolution and encouraged the study of mankind along naturalistic lines. Equally revolutionary discoveries were made in physics, particularly in thermodynamics, which resulted in the integration of biology and physics, the organic and inorganic, in a common energy system representing the primal force of an interrelated universe.

Thought, too, was a form of energy, as Henry Adams pointed out. Gustav Fechner, a year after the publication of Darwin's epic work, announced that man's mind could be studied scientifically and measured quantitatively, establishing in effect the science of psychology. In 1874 Ernest Brücke in his *Lectures on Physiology* developed the theory of the living organism as a dynamic system governed by the laws of chemistry and physics. Brücke exerted an important influence on Freud, who in the 1890's began to evolve a dynamic psychology which, according to Calvin Hall, "studies the transformations and exchanges of energy within the personality." The aspiration of late nineteenth-century scientific history was to create a physiobiological synthesis embracing mankind and the stars. The mechanistic world systems evolved by European scholars like Edward Buchner, Jacob Moleschott, Wilhelm Ostwald, Ernst Haeckel, and Herbert Spencer had their counterparts among American his-



torians in the work of John Fiske and Henry Adams. To these men, history represented a continuum with the universe of nature and, like nature, was supposedly governed by law.

It is understandable, therefore, that Charles McLean Andrews wrote retrospectively of this era as a time when the historian pursued "his experiments just as does the investigator in the scientific laboratory."

As a preliminary methodological step, the historian, like the scientist, had to assemble the facts. In gathering data, the scientific historian made a particular point of deriving facts from original sources, a technique which was stressed by their German mentors, Bluntschli and Erdmannsdorffer among others, in whose seminars they studied. As has been pointed out before, this was by no means an original development, since earlier American historians like Bancroft and Hildreth were not inclined to play fast and loose with historical data. What scientific methodology contributed at this time was less the kind of factual accuracy which the best of the earlier historians took for granted than a mystique about historical data in which the facts would yield meaning to the impartial historian, provided that his researches were sufficiently painstaking. As monograph succeeded monograph, it was half expected that as a result of so much diligent research into narrow segments of the past a historical law inherent in the data of history would emerge as a result of the additive process alone.

Second, the scientific historians had implicit faith in the comparative method enabling them to classify data "to the fullest extent possible." The comparative method had been used by Cuvier in zoölogy, Lyell in geology, Muller in philology, and was now being applied to history. In 1874, Sir Henry Maine predicted that this method would open a new world to the historical investigator "and that not an isolated world, a world shut up within itself, but a world in which times and tongues and nations which seemed parted poles asunder, now find each one its own place, its own relation to each other, as members of one common *primaeval* brotherhood."

Employing the comparative method, scientific historians discovered seeming similarities among American, German, and English institutions, leading to the conclusion that these institutions had a common origin among prehistoric Aryan peoples whose very existence the scientific historians postulated rather than proved. American institutions were derived supposedly

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from this original race as a consequence of Aryo-Teutonic migrations from an original Aryan homeland to Germany; thence to England by Anglo, Saxon, and Jute invaders in the seventh century; and ultimately to New England by the Puritans in the seventeenth century. The United States therefore was regarded as the latest homeland of the Aryo-Teutonic peoples who deposited the Aryan institutional seed upon New England's shores. History, concluded Herbert Baxter Adams, most ardent proponent of the Teutonic hypotheses, "should not be content with describing effects when it can explain causes. It is just as improbable that free local institutions should spring up without a germ along American shores as that English wheat should have grown here without planting."

As Adams' statement indicates, analogies borrowed from biology were crucial to the theory of the Aryo-Teutonic theory of the origin of American nationality. Racial continuity among the Aryo-Teutonic peoples insured the recapitulation of the original Aryan political heritage in each new homeland. The first generation of American scientific historians, committed to the theory of the Aryo-Teutonic origins of American nationality, wrote in terms of the biological evolution of the Aryan institutional "seed": its being "transplanted" to Germany, England, and the United States; "germinating" into the institutions of the New England town and the New England states; and, finally, into the Constitution of the United States. More than one scientific historian saw the American Constitution as the culmination of Aryan political evolution.

The stronghold of this theory was Herbert Baxter Adams' seminar at Johns Hopkins. It was also taught by Moses Colt Tyler and Andrew D. White at Cornell and by Albert Bushnell Hart at Harvard. Through the widely read histories of John Fiske, the Teutonic theory became familiar to general readers. So wide has been the acceptance of Teutonism, wrote Charles McLean Andrews, "and so strongly installed is it in the minds of both students and readers that it might seem more bold than discreet to raise the question regarding the soundness of the theory."

Scientific history in the late nineteenth century was also influenced by discoveries in the field of physics. "If the historian," wrote Henry Adams in 1876, "will only consent to shut his eyes for a moment to the microscopic analyses of personal motives and idiosyncracies, he cannot but become conscious of

a silent pulsation that commands his respect, a steady movement that resembles in its mode of operation the mechanical operation of nature herself." One of the aims of Adams' *History of the United States during the Jefferson and Madison Administrations* was to grasp this "silent pulsation," to ascertain the natural laws underlying the development of the American nation between 1800 and 1817, and to predict lines of future national evolution. Adams assumed that there was linear progress in history that was not only measurable in the past but predictable in the future. "With almost the certainty of a mathematical formula, knowing the rate of increase of population and of wealth [the American people] could read in advance their economical history for at least a hundred years." The "movement of thought," continued Adams "was equally well defined"; "the character of people and government was formed; the lines of their activity were fixed."

Despite the great expectations of those who tried to make a science of history, the late nineteenth-century attempt to apply the laws of the physical and biological universe to history yielded no impressive results. Critics soon pointed out that there was no necessary continuum between nature and society and that, even if there were, the laws applicable to one field are not necessarily applicable to the other. In addition, the comparative method, a mainstay of scientific history, began to be recognized as a device of dubious value to the historian. Analogies, wrote Edward Channing, between American institutions and the institutions of the primitive Germanic tribes were not identities, nor were analogous institutions descended from one another. "The argument," said Channing, "that because a New England town and a German village were each surrounded by a defensive wall, the one is descended from the other, proves too much. A similar line of argument would prove the origin of New England towns to be the Massai enclosure of Central Africa." Slowly but surely, critical scholarship undermined the main props of the Teutonic theory of the origins of American institutions. Within a very few years, the Teutonic hypothesis survived mainly as a historical archaism, cropping up occasionally, and as late as 1921, in unexpected places like James Truslow Adams' *History of Southampton*.

Henry Adams' attempt to apply the laws of physics to history was equally unproductive. It is true that Adams' history has been much read and much admired, but mainly for reasons

other than its scientific pretensions. Nevertheless, Adams persisted in the effort to discover law in history. In 1909, by substituting devolution for Darwinian and Spencerian evolution, Adams premised a theory of history upon the second law of thermodynamics that Lord Kelvin had propounded in the middle of the nineteenth century. According to Kelvin, the universe was declining progressively in energy, and Adams, who considered thought a form of energy, concluded that mankind was becoming increasingly incapable of responding creatively to environmental challenge. Despite the fact that, at the time of the writing of "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," the second law of thermodynamics was held invalid by most physicists, Adams made it the basis of calculations leading to the conclusion that by 1921, or at the latest 1924, thought would have reached the limit of its possibilities and mankind would descend rapidly into chaos.

Adams' application of "the rule of phase" to history represented the dying gasp of the late nineteenth-century effort to establish a science of history based on the laws of biology and physics. Adams pronounced what amounted to an epitaph on this movement when he wrote in 1910 that the idea that history was "a process of mental evolution . . . controlled, like the evolution of any series of chemical or electrical equilibria, by one general formula" left "no followers, no school, no tradition."

In the present century the effort toward a science of history continued sporadically and with the bulk of the members of the historical profession unconvinced. William M. Sloane, in 1912, comparing history and the natural sciences with respect to predictability, argued that the sciences which claimed to be the most exact achieved "at best but a more or less close approximation to prediction, a higher or lower degree of probability." History, Sloane went on to say, might match or approximate the probability of the natural sciences if research revealed enough of the factual background. A few years later, Edward Cheyney revealed six inherently moral, as distinct from mechanical or biological, historical laws: the law of the continuity of history, the law of impermanence in history, the law of the interdependence of mankind, the law of the inevitability of democracy, the law of the necessity of free consent to government, and the law of moral progress. Cheyney also believed that once the historian grasped the laws of history he could act "with the same intelligence and precision and anticipation of

success as the physicist, engineer, and cattle breeder." The last important effort to establish a science of history was by the Marxists, who, mainly in the 1930's (there had been earlier efforts in this direction), attempted to hitch American development to their universal dialectic, again without success and without significant following.

Opposition to the principle of historical law by the bulk of the historical profession derives from the belief that the great diversity of factors entering into a given historical situation makes prediction or extensive generalization impossible. It is also argued that the data of nature are static and repeatable and may be stated in terms of law, whereas the data of history are progressive and unrepeatable and permit of no easy formulation. Finally, there are some historians, fewer in number than those taking the above positions, who view historical knowledge as inherently subjective—so subjective, in fact, as to provide insubstantial foundation for presumably objective historical law.

The foundation stone of the scientific history of the Teutonists was the fact. The latter, in addition to being immutable, allegedly possessed a natural order. Consequently, when the disciples of the so-called "New History," about 1910, challenged not only the ordering of the facts but also "the being of a fact," they mounted a two-sided attack upon the scientific concepts of their predecessors.

Writing to Frederick Jackson Turner in 1910, Carl Becker recalled that when he was Turner's student, the latter had given him to understand "that no one . . . knew 'exactly what happened,'" and Turner replied that he had wanted to accomplish just that. In questioning "the being of a fact" and by describing the fact "as not planted on the solid ground of fixed conditions" but as being "itself a part of the changing currents, the complex and interacting influences of the time, deriving its significance as a fact from its relation to the deeper-seated movements of the age," Turner was challenging the very foundation of scientific history as evolved by the Teutonists. Because, if the facts were not fixed immutably, then the superstructure that derived from them—comparative method, historical evolution, and biological basis of institutional continuity—inevitably collapsed. To Becker, the "facts of history whatever they once were" were "only mental images or pictures which the historian makes in order to comprehend it." The continuity

of history, Becker concluded, was largely subjective with the historian.

Such extreme historical relativism, however, ruled out the possibility not only of historical law but also of true historical knowledge. Neither Becker nor Turner pushed this position to its ultimate and, from the point of view of historiography, totally negative conclusion. Instead, Turner, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1910, used relativism as a springboard for attacking not "the being of a fact" but those who derived historical law from a priori evidence and exploited history for "justificatory appendices." The pathway of history, Turner warned, "is strewn with the wrecks of 'known and acknowledged truth' . . . due not only to defective analyses and imperfect statistics, but also to the lack of critical historical methods, of insufficient historical mindedness . . . to failure to give due attention to the relativity and transience of the conditions from which . . . laws were deduced."

Although the historian could not tell for certain what went on in the past, continued Turner, he could at least try honestly to find out. This required conscientious effort to understand the material of history and, along with such an effort, use of the hypothesis (more tentative than historical law) to guide the historian's probings. In formulating and refining the hypothesis, the historian would be aided by concepts derived from the social sciences: economics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The gist of Turner's statement is that, if history could not be made into a science, it might at least be infiltrated, through the formulation of hypotheses, by allied disciplines for the purpose of finding truer understanding.

The hypothesis, if less ironclad than historical law, was still more a commitment to a given point of view than simple induction from facts. It assumed that the process of inquiry in historical research began less with a problem of interpretation presented by a body of empirical data and more with theory whose validity had been established. Theoretically, then, the hypothesis committed the historian more to a point of view than the "neutralist" claim that the facts of history "speak for themselves" and that the narration of events without reference to a specific philosophy of history precluded bias. In practice, however, it is difficult to say whether the conscious use of a hypothesis made for greater or less bias. The pledges of impartiality that adorn the prefaces of historical studies are not always honored in their texts, and historians who deliberately avoid a

philosophy of history do not by virtue of that fact strip off personal prejudices.

It cannot be said that the major historical hypotheses have lived up to the expectations of the disciples of the "New History." In the last fifty years or so major hypotheses in American history adopted as determinants first the frontier, then economics, geography, section, and region, and, finally, the city. These hypotheses, certainly in their more sweeping statements (substantial exegetical literature has emerged as to what Turner and Beard really meant), have not withstood the corrosion of criticism.

The frontier hypothesis, given classic expression by Turner in 1893, argued that to our own day "American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explains American development." Subsumed under this major hypothesis were several corollary theses: that "the sanative influences of the free spaces of the West were destined to ameliorate labor's condition, to afford new hopes and new faith to a pioneer democracy and to postpone the problem" of the class struggle; that "the most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy here and in Europe"; that "the frontier is productive of individualism . . . [which] from the beginning promoted democracy."

Not until the late 1920's did the frontier hypothesis come under heavy attack. At that time, Charles A. Beard and Louis M. Hacker criticized it for minimizing such factors as urbanization and industrialization, class and economic forces. Carter Goodrich, Sol Davison, Murray Kane, and Fred Shannon demonstrated during the next decade that the frontier was not the "safety valve" for eastern workers in periods of depression, as Turner had implied. Also, in this period, Benjamin Wright, Jr., argued that democratic development in America was less the result of the impact of the frontier than the consequence of an over-all nineteenth-century democratic trend that embraced western Europe as well as the United States. In 1941 Turner's terminology and concepts were examined vigorously by G. W. Pierson and were found to be most imprecise. "In what it proposes," concluded Pierson, "the frontier hypothesis needs painstaking revision. By what it fails to mention, the theory today disqualified itself as an adequate guide to American development."

The classic application of the economic hypothesis to a major

historical event is Charles A. Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, which was published in 1913. Until very recently this volume appeared to have withstood time and historical criticism a great deal better than did the frontier hypothesis. Not that historians failed to recognize weaknesses of detail in the thesis and in its monistic view of human motivation. Indeed, Beard himself in the 1935 edition of his work, as well as in his other writings, attempted to meet and reconcile some of the criticisms that had been made. But for many, Robert E. Brown's line-by-line analysis of Beard's work—concluding with the indictment that “if historians accept the Beard thesis . . . they must do so with the full knowledge that their acceptance is founded on an ‘act of faith’ not an analysis of historical method, or that they are indulging in a ‘noble dream’ not history”—was something of a revelation.

To Beard, the economic interpretation of history was “as nearly axiomatic as any proposition can be.” If, said Beard, you were to find that “men owning substantially the same amounts of the same kind of property were equally divided on the matter of adoption or rejection—it would then become apparent that the Constitution had no ascertainable relation to economic groups or classes, but was the product of some abstract causes remote from the chief business of life—gaining a livelihood.” But on the other hand, if you discovered “that substantially all of merchants, money lenders, security holders, manufacturers, shippers, capitalists, and financiers and their professional associates are to be found on one side in support of the Constitution and that substantially all or a major part of the opposition came from the non-slaveholding farmers and the debtors—would it not be pretty conclusively demonstrated that our fundamental law was not the product of an abstraction known as ‘the whole people’ but of a group of economic interests which must have expected beneficial results from its adoption?”

Brown's criticism of Beard is significant not only in its detail but also because of its implication of the dangers of shaping history by hypothesis: the tendency to claim too much and, in the excitement of developing a point, to lapse into grievous historiographic fault. Beard, alleged Brown, on occasion quoted out of context and excluded quotations that would not sustain his thesis, relied too much upon secondary works, substituted innuendo for fact, used evidence from one period of history to justify conclusions about another, and used emotion-laden



words like "coup d'état" imprecisely. Brown's critique of Beard has amounted to the demolition of a historiographic style. And yet it was in the pattern of the declining popularity of the economic hypothesis since the early 1930's, another of the results of which was to reduce Vernon L. Parrington's economically determined *Main Currents in American Thought* to pretty much of a shambles.

The geographical, sectional, and regional hypotheses, like other hypotheses, were anticipated to some extent before their more definitive statement. As early as 1793 Jedidiah Morse, "father of American geography," indicated the geographic boundaries of the "Grand Divisions of the United States." In 1891 Nathaniel S. Shaler's *Nature and Man in America* stressed the role of geographic influences as determining factors in American history, a point of view which also found expression in the work of Ellen C. Semple, disciple of the anthrogeographer, Ratzel. By 1900 the sectional and regional interpretations, which embraced a complex of factors generally within a geographic framework, was, according to Fulmer Mood, "well established at the University of Wisconsin."

Despite the impetus to sectional and regional studies through the publication of Turner's *The Significance of Sections in American History* and the usefulness of the regional and sectional concepts in history, the social sciences, and government, regionalism, as a hypothesis in historiography, suffers from the historian's inability to define the region and from the fact that there is no unanimity of lay or scholarly opinion on a single scheme of regional classification. Thus, one of the criticisms of Walter P. Webb's significant regional study, *The Great Plains*, was its alleged failure to delimit properly the Great Plains region. Like the frontier hypothesis, the sectional and regional concepts are considered too all-embracing, too inclusive of other factors, too vague in what they embrace, to enable the historian to use them as precise tools of historical interpretation.

The latest of the major historical hypotheses is A. M. Schlesinger's urban interpretation of American history, which was advanced in 1940 and urged "reconsideration of American history from the urban point of view." According to Schlesinger, Turner in his zeal to correct older notions like the Teutonic theory of American institutional origins "overlooked another order of society which, rivalling the frontier even in the earliest days, eventually became the major force. The city marched

westward with the outposts of settlement, always injecting exacting elements into pioneer existence, while in the older sections it steadily extended its domain over politics, economics, and all the other interests of life. The time came when Turner himself confessed the need of 'an urban reinterpretation of our history.' A true understanding of America's past demands this balanced view—an appreciation of the significance of both frontier and city."

The urban interpretation of history is open to the same kind of challenge as the other hypotheses which we have considered, insofar as it offers a partial and incomplete picture of the American past. According to Schlesinger, "the city no less than the frontier has been a major factor in American civilization. Without an appreciation of the role of both the story is only half told." Contrary to the implications of this statement, however, there are other possibilities of interpretation besides the frontier and urban hypotheses. And when Schlesinger writes that "the underlying strife between city and country led . . . to the formation of the first national parties under the constitution," we can see some justifiable basis for William Diamond's criticism of the urban interpretation on the ground that city and urban, like region and section, are too broad in their connotation to be useful as historical determinants.

Disenchantment alike with historical law and sweeping historical hypothesis has caused a few American historians to adopt an extreme antiscientist position and others to lean in that direction. This is reinforced by the current political climate, wherein historical determinism is looked upon almost suspiciously as a denial of free will and free choice in human affairs and, if not actually antidemocratic, as at least having the potential of being so.

There has been emphasis, almost prideful emphasis, upon the uniqueness of the subject matter of history and its emancipation from the positivistic philosophy that gave rise not only to historical law but to the social sciences as well. Distinctiveness, unrepeatability, and radical individuality are considered the very essence of historiographical data. Dr. Lloyd Sorenson, writing in the *American Quarterly*, has ventured to predict that the revolution in American historiography brought about by the late nineteenth-century impetus toward historical science will be repeated in the current era with the development of the anti-scientific historiographical tradition of *Historismus* "and an un-

named development beyond *Historismus*" that is rooted in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, Heinrich Rickert, Ernst Troeltsch, and Friedrich Meinecke. *Historismus* is regarded by Sorenson as the antithesis of "the futile attempt of historical scientists since the enlightenment to force historical reality into the alien forms of natural reality. . . ."

In addition to individualizing tendencies that may be inherent in historicism (I use the word *may* advisedly because I believe that Sorenson has underestimated the element of synthesis in Meinecke's statement of the theory of historicism),<sup>1</sup> antisocialism is strengthened by historical relativism, which, as we have seen, places the facts of history at the mercy of perception, with the result that all interpretations of history became equally valid or invalid.

Fortunately, neither extreme individualizing tendencies nor extreme relativism are much manifest in American historiography. Charles A. Beard made it plain that he was not the relativist he was accused of being as a result of publication of "That Noble Dream." Indeed, Beard attacked relativist extremism, including aspects of the New Deal philosophy. Although Beard once pushed antisocialism to the point of rejecting the concept of cause in history, he never attempted to write history without introducing causal concepts. Beard never lost faith in scientific method insofar as it enabled the historian to seek out the facts of history. "The inquiring spirit of history," he wrote "using the scientific method, is the chief safeguard against the tyranny of authority, bureaucracy, and brute power."

American historians are far from resolving the objectivist-relativist argument. They have evolved, however, an eminently practical compromise by learning, as Oscar Handlin said in 1953, to live with relativism. "Historians once disturbed by the discovery that history could not achieve scientific objectivity or finality have learned to work with materials which entail subjective involvement on the part of the historian and to accept the fact that completely objective truth is unobtainable." Regardless of the ultimate validity of such a reconciliation, it has apparently enabled the American historian to manage his materials so that relativism has not had anything like the disintegrating effect upon the American historical tradition that,

<sup>1</sup> Selection from Meinecke's *Values and Causalities in History* in Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present* (New York, 1957), p. 272.

according to Hannah Arendt,<sup>2</sup> it has had upon European historiography and the European historical tradition.

Although impressed by the uniqueness of historical phenomena and skeptical of historical law and hypothesis, the American historian has not surrendered his faith in generalization. Louis Gottschalk has said that "no honest scholar need feel ashamed because his generalizations are not golden or may not even glitter; even a common-sense truth or a 'law' so modified and conditioned as to be a truism is better than an untruth or an unexamined platitude." The historian's process of generalizing is aided by his borrowing from the social sciences. Applying social science methodology to history is as old, if not older, than the so-called "New History" of 1910. The subject has been treated most fully in 1954 in *The Social Sciences in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography of the Social Science Research Council*. This is an effective summary of the treatment of social science concepts that the historian might draw upon. But as to how he might draw—that is, concerning the technique of integration—the report is vague. "There are no neat, well-formulated social science methods that can be learned and applied [to history] without scrutiny and no social science concept either implies or involves any deviation from the strict rules of procedure that are the hallmark of sound historical research." This conclusion would seem to be in keeping with David Reisman's contention that, compared "to the new specialties that have emerged at the juncture of physics and chemistry or of physics and biology, the social sciences have been curiously static in the relations they engendered among each other." And, one might add, the relationship between history and the social sciences has been more static still.

The barriers to effective integration between history and the behavioral and social sciences are essentially these. The social science approach is essentially microcosmic and centers in the relationship frequently lending itself to quantitative expression, between a relatively few phenomena in a very limited and, for the most part, contemporary time sequence. The historian's approach, on the other hand, is macrocosmic, embracing a great number of variables distributed rather widely in space and time, whose interaction can rarely be precisely determined and, as a rule, cannot be measured quantitatively. In addition, certain of

<sup>2</sup> "History and Immortality," *Partisan Review* (Winter, 1957), pp. 11-35.

the methods of the social and behavioral sciences—such as interviewing, polling, and other aspects of sociological inquiry that require the presence of the subject—are useless to the historian, who, concerned with mankind's past, cannot ask questions of the dead. In addition, the historian has certain reservations about the methodology and technique of the social sciences. The historian tends to be more skeptical than the behavioral scientist of the values of psychological and psychoanalytical techniques in investigation, of the superiority of the quantitative measurements of the social scientist to his own informed guesses. The pollsters, Henry David asserts, rightly or wrongly, had they been around in 1800, could not have done a better job of estimating public opinion in the United States than did Henry Adams by using the historian's traditional sources.

On the other hand, insights contributed by the social sciences, not all of which were unanticipated by historians, have prompted increased awareness of hitherto neglected materials and new types of data, of new problems and new generalizations in historical investigation. "Prompted by the social sciences," writes Richard Hofstadter, whose work is an outstanding example of the integration of historiography with behavioral and social science method, "the historian begins to realize that matters of central concern to other disciplines force him to enlarge his conception of his own task—to place the results of social science research in much broader context."

To the extent that American history resists being categorized as a science, its public prestige has been diminished. The demand by a practical society that its experience be analyzed—so that essential tasks like predicting election returns, measuring opinion, and selling deodorants might be performed—has been met by others than the historians. Government and industry make use of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, economists, and political scientists while, apart from a few areas of government service and an occasional business history, the historian can only teach and write books that, for the most part, do not sell at all well. The social scientists seem to have captured the public imagination. When Louis Gottschalk asserts that one of the historian's most important functions is to "check the looseness of others' generalizations about human experiences," he is describing a very necessary function. But it is not likely to impress even the informed public, which has been conditioned by a certain amount of vulgarization of the social sciences to

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think in terms of formula explanations of diverse social phenomena.

The historian, for the most part, does not appear to be too much concerned over what many fear is the declining status of the guild. The best of contemporary historiography is synthetic and macrocosmic, with more than a little attention paid to literary form. The historian will integrate social science research within the context of a sweeping historical narrative rather than advance such research by subjecting another small area to minute examination. The historian will shy away from group research and the problem-solving technique of the social sciences. At the same time, he upholds the non-utilitarian and individual character of historical inquiry as an "adornment of the free mind," an expression of the historian's inner creative urge rather than an attempt to fill consciously a specific social need.

In evaluating the idea of a science of American history, it should be remembered that the heritage of historiography is an ancient one with its own inner development. It would be ridiculous to deny the impact of scientific and social science development upon American historiography. There have been significant changes in American historiographic patterns from the prescientific era, but in other respects the changes have been surprisingly small.

## 9. *How the Frontier Shaped the American Character: Turner's Frontier Hypothesis\**

RAY ALLEN BILLINGTON

Since the dawn days of historical writing in the United States, historians have labored mightily, and usually in vain, to answer the famous question posed by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in the eighteenth century: "What then is the American, this new man?" Was that composite figure actually a "new man" with unique traits that distinguished him from his Old World ancestors? Or was he merely a transplanted European? The most widely accepted—and bitterly disputed—answer was advanced by a young Wisconsin historian named Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. The American was a new man, he held, who owed his distinctive characteristics and institutions to the unusual New World environment—characterized by the availability of free land and an ever-receding frontier—in which his civilization had grown to maturity. This environmental theory, accepted for a generation after its enunciation, has been vigorously attacked and vehemently defended during the past two decades. How has it fared in this battle of words? Is it still a valid key to the meaning of American history?

Turner's own background provides a clue to the answer. Born in Portage, Wisconsin, in 1861 of pioneer parents from upper New York state, he was reared in a land fringed by the interminable forest and still stamped with the mark of youth. There he mingled with pioneers who had trapped beaver or hunted Indians or cleared the virgin wilderness: from them he learned

\* Reprinted with permission from *American Heritage* IX (April, 1958), 4-9, 86-89.

something of the free and easy democratic values prevailing among those who judged men by their own accomplishments rather than those of their ancestors. At the University of Wisconsin Turner's faith in cultural democracy was deepened, while his intellectual vistas were widened through contact with teachers who led him into that wonderland of adventure where scientific techniques were being applied to social problems, where Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis was awakening scholars to the continuity of progress, and where searchers after truth were beginning to realize the multiplicity of forces responsible for human behavior. The young student showed how well he had learned these lessons in his master's essay on "The Character and Influence of the Fur Trade in Wisconsin"; he emphasized the evolution of institutions from simple to complex forms.

From Wisconsin Turner journeyed to Johns Hopkins University, as did many eager young scholars of that day, only to meet stubborn opposition for the historical theories already taking shape in his mind. His principal professor, Herbert Baxter Adams, viewed mankind's development in evolutionary terms, but held that environment had no place in the equation; American institutions could be understood only as outgrowths of European "germs" that had originated among Teutonic tribes in the forests of medieval Germany. To Turner this explanation was unsatisfactory. The "germ theory" explained the similarities between Europe and America, but what of the many differences? This problem was still much in his mind when he returned to the University of Wisconsin as an instructor in 1889. In two remarkable papers prepared during the next few years he set forth his answer. The first, "The Significance of History," reiterated his belief in what historians call "multiple causation"; to understand man's complex nature, he insisted, one needed not only a knowledge of past politics, but a familiarity with social, economic, and cultural forces as well. The second, "Problems in American History," attempted to isolate those forces most influential in explaining the unique features of American development. Among these Turner believed that the most important was the need for institutions to "adapt themselves to the changes of a remarkably developing, expanding people."

This was the theory that was expanded into a full-blown historical hypothesis in the famous essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," read at a conference of historians held in connection with the World Fair in Chi-



cago in 1893. The differences between European and American civilization, Turner stated in that monumental work, were in part the product of the distinctive environment of the New World. The most unusual features of that environment were "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward." This free land served as a magnet to draw men westward, attracted by the hope of economic gain or adventure. They came as Europeans or easterners, but they soon realized that the wilderness environment was ill-adapted to the habits, institutions, and cultural baggage of the stratified societies they had left behind. Complex political institutions were unnecessary in a tiny frontier outpost; traditional economic practices were useless in an isolated community geared to an economy of self-sufficiency; rigid social customs were outmoded in a land where prestige depended on skill with the axe or rifle rather than on hereditary glories; cultural pursuits were unessential in a land where so many material tasks awaited doing. Hence in each pioneer settlement there occurred a rapid reversion to the primitive. What little government was necessary was provided by simple associations of settlers; each man looked after his family without reliance on his fellows; social hierarchies disintegrated, and cultural progress came to a halt. As the newcomers moved backward along the scale of civilization, the habits and customs of their traditional cultures were forgotten.

Gradually, however, newcomers drifted in, and as the man-land ratio increased, the community began a slow climb back toward civilization. Governmental controls were tightened and extended, economic specialization began, social stratification set in, and cultural activities quickened. But the new society that eventually emerged differed from the old from which it had sprung. The abandonment of cultural baggage during the migrations, the borrowings from the many cultures represented in each pioneer settlement, the deviations natural in separate evolutions, and the impact of the environment all played their parts in creating a unique social organism similar to but differing from those in the East. An "Americanization" of men and their institutions had taken place.

Turner believed that many of the characteristics associated with the American people were traceable to their experience, during the three centuries required to settle the continent, of

constantly "beginning over again." Their mobility, their optimism, their inventiveness and willingness to accept innovation, their materialism, their exploitive wastefulness—these were frontier traits: for the pioneer, accustomed to repeated moves as he drifted westward, viewed the world through rose-colored glasses as he dreamed of a better future, experimented constantly as he adapted artifacts and customs to his peculiar environment, scorned culture as a deterrent to the practical tasks that bulked so large in his life, and squandered seemingly inexhaustible natural resources with abandon. Turner also ascribed America's distinctive brand of individualism, with its dislike of governmental interference in economic functions, to the experience of pioneers who wanted no hindrance from society as they exploited nature's riches. Similarly, he traced the exaggerated nationalism of the United States to its roots among frontiersmen who looked to the national government for land, transportation outlets, and protection against the Indians. And he believed that America's faith in democracy had stemmed from a pioneering experience in which the leveling influence of poverty and the uniqueness of local problems encouraged majority self-rule. He pointed out that these characteristics, prominent among frontiersmen, had persisted long after the frontier itself was no more.

This was Turner's famous "frontier hypothesis." For a generation after its enunciation its persuasive logic won uncritical acceptance among historians, but beginning in the late 1920's, and increasingly after Turner's death in 1932, an avalanche of criticism steadily mounted. His theories, critics said, were contradictory, his generalizations unsupported, his assumptions inadequately based; what empirical proof could he advance, they asked, to prove that the frontier experience was responsible for American individualism, mobility, or wastefulness? He was damned as a romanticist for his claim that democracy sprang from the forest environment of the United States and as an isolationist for failing to recognize the continuing impact of Europe on America. As the "bait-Turner" vogue gained popularity among younger scholars of the 1930's with their international, semi-Marxian views of history, the criticisms of the frontier theory became as irrational as the earlier support rendered it by overenthusiastic advocates.

During the past decade, however, a healthy reaction has slowly and unspectacularly gained momentum. Today's scholars,

gradually realizing that Turner was advancing a hypothesis rather than proving a theory, have shown a healthy tendency to abandon fruitless haggling over the meaning of his phrases and to concentrate instead on testing his assumptions. They have directed their efforts primarily toward re-examining his hypothesis in the light of criticisms directed against it and applying it to frontier areas beyond the borders of the United States. Their findings have modified many of the views expressed by Turner but have gone far toward proving that the frontier hypothesis remains one essential tool—albeit not the only one—for interpreting American history.

That Turner was guilty of oversimplifying both the nature and the causes of the migration process was certainly true. He pictured settlers as moving westward in an orderly procession—fur trappers, cattlemen, miners, pioneer farmers, and equipped farmers—with each group playing its part in the transmutation of a wilderness into a civilization. Free land was the magnet that lured them onward, he believed, and this operated most effectively in periods of depression, when the displaced workers of the East sought a refuge from economic storms amidst nature's abundance in the West. "The wilderness ever opened the gate of escape to the poor, the discontented and oppressed," Turner wrote at one time. "If social conditions tended to crystallize in the east, beyond the Alleghenies there was freedom."

No one of these assumptions can be substantiated in the simplified form in which Turner stated it. His vision of an "orderly procession of civilization, marching single file westward" failed to account for deviations that were almost as important as the norm; as essential to the conquest of the forest as trappers or farmers were soldiers, mill-operators, distillers, artisans, storekeepers, merchants, lawyers, editors, speculators, and town dwellers. All played their role, and all contributed to a complex frontier social order that bore little resemblance to the primitive societies Turner pictured. This was especially the case with the early town builders. The hamlets that sprang up adjacent to each pioneer settlement were products of the environment as truly as were the cattlemen or Indian fighters; each evolved economic functions geared to the needs of the primitive area surrounding it, and, in the tight public controls maintained over such essential functions as grist-milling or retail selling, each mirrored the frontiersmen's community-oriented views. In these villages, too, the equalitarian influence of the West was re-

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flected in thoroughly democratic governments, with popularly elected councils supreme and the mayor reduced to a mere figurehead.

The pioneers who marched westward in this disorganized procession were not attracted by the magnet of "free land," for Turner's assumption that before 1862 the public domain was open to all who could pay \$1.25 an acre, or that acreage was free after the Homestead Act was passed in that year, has been completely disproved. Turner failed to recognize the presence in the procession to the frontier of that omnipresent profit-seeker, the speculator. Jobbers were always ahead of farmers in the advance westward, buying up likely town sites or appropriating the best farm lands, where the soil was good and transportation outlets available. When the settler arrived his choice was between paying the speculator's price or accepting an inferior site. Even the Homestead Act failed to lessen speculative activity. Capitalizing on generous government grants to railroads and state educational institutions (which did not want to be bothered with sales to individuals), or buying bonus script from soldiers, or securing Indian lands as the reservations were contracted, or seizing on faulty features of congressional acts for the disposal of swampland and timberland, jobbers managed to engross most of the Far West's arable acreage. As a result, for every newcomer who obtained a homestead from the government, six or seven purchased farms from speculators.

Those who made these purchases were not, as Turner believed, displaced eastern workers fleeing periodic industrial depressions. Few city-dwelling artisans had the skills or inclination, and almost none the capital, to escape to the frontier. Land prices of \$1.25 an acre may seem low today, but they were prohibitive for laborers earning only a dollar a day. Moreover, needed farm machinery, animals, and housing added about \$1,000 to the cost of starting a farm in the 1850's, while the cheapest travel rate from New York to St. Louis was about \$13 a person. Because these sums were always beyond the reach of factory workers (in bad times they deterred migration even from the rural East), the frontier never served as a "safety valve" for laborers in the sense that Turner employed the term. Instead, the American frontiers were pushed westward largely by younger sons from adjacent farm areas who migrated in periods of prosperity. While these generalizations apply to the pre-Civil War era that was Turner's principal interest, they are even more applicable to the late nineteenth century. During that period the major population

shifts were from country to city rather than vice versa; for every worker who left the factory to move to the farm, twenty persons moved from farm to factory. If a safety valve did exist at that time, it was a rural safety valve, drawing off surplus farm labor and thus lessening agrarian discontent during the Granger and Populist eras.

Admitting that the procession to the frontier was more complex than Turner realized, that good lands were seldom free, and that a safety valve never operated to drain the dispossessed and the malcontented from industrial centers, does this mean that his conclusions concerning the migration process have been completely discredited? The opposite is emphatically true. A more divergent group than Turner realized felt the frontier's impact, but that does not minimize the extent of the impact. Too, while lands in the West were almost never free, they were relatively cheaper than those in Europe or the East, and this differential did serve as an attracting force. Nor can pages of statistics disprove the fact that, at least until the Civil War, the frontier served as an indirect safety valve by attracting displaced eastern farmers who would otherwise have moved into industrial cities; thousands who left New England or New York for the Old Northwest in the 1830's and 1840's, when the "rural decay" of the Northeast was beginning, would have sought factory jobs had no western outlet existed.

The effect of their exodus is made clear by comparing the political philosophies of the United States with those of another frontier country, Australia. There, lands lying beyond the coastal mountains were closed to pioneers by the aridity of the soil and by great sheep ranchers who were first on the scene. Australia, as a result, developed an urban civilization and an industrialized population relatively sooner than did the United States; and it had labor unions, labor-dominated governments, and political philosophies that would be viewed as radical in America. Without the safety valve of its own West, feeble though it may have been, such a course might have been followed in the United States.

Frederick Jackson Turner's conclusions concerning the influence of the frontier on Americans have also been questioned, debated, and modified since he advanced his hypothesis, but they have not been seriously altered. This is true even of one of his statements that has been more vigorously disputed than any other: "American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; it

was not carried in the *Susan Constant* to Virginia, nor in the *Mayflower* to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained a new strength each time it touched a new frontier." When he penned those oft-quoted words, Turner wrote as a propagandist against the "germ theory" school of history; in a less emotional and more thoughtful moment, he ascribed America's democratic institutions not to "imitation, or simple borrowing," but to "the evolution and adaptation of organs in response to changed environment." Even this moderate theory has aroused critical venom. Democracy, according to anti-Turnerians, was well advanced in Europe and *was* transported to America on the *Susan Constant* and the *Mayflower*; within this country democratic practices have multiplied most rapidly as a result of eastern lower-class pressures and have only been imitated in the West. If, critics ask, some mystical forest influence was responsible for such practices as manhood suffrage, increased authority for legislatures at the expense of executives, equitable legislative representation, and women's political rights, why did they not evolve in frontier areas outside the United States—in Russia, Latin America, and Canada, for example—exactly as they did here?

The answer, of course, is that democratic theory and institutions were imported from England, but that the frontier environment tended to make them, in practice, even more democratic. Two conditions common in pioneer communities made this inevitable. One was the wide diffusion of land ownership; this created an independent outlook and led to a demand for political participation on the part of those who had a stake in society. The other was the common social and economic level and the absence, characteristic of all primitive communities, of any prior leadership structure. The lack of any national or external controls made self-rule a hard necessity, and the frontiersmen, with their experience in community co-operation at cabin-raising, logrollings, corn-huskings, and road or school building, accepted simple democratic practices as natural and inevitable. These practices, originating on the grass roots level, were expanded and extended in the recurring process of government-building that marked the westward movement of civilization. Each new territory that was organized—there were 31 in all—required a frame of government; this was drafted by relatively poor recent arrivals or by a minority of upper-class

leaders, all of whom were committed to democratic ideals through their frontier community experiences. The result was a constant democratization of institutions and practices as constitution-makers adopted the most liberal features of older frames of government with which they were familiar.

This was true even in frontier lands outside the United States, for wherever there were frontiers, existing practices were modified in the direction of greater equality and a wider popular participation in governmental affairs. The results were never identical, of course, for both the environment and the nature of the imported institutions varied too greatly from country to country. In Russia, for instance, even though it promised no democracy comparable to that of the United States, the eastward-moving Siberian frontier, the haven of some seven million peasants during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was notable for its lack of guilds, authoritarian churches, and all-powerful nobility. An autocratic official visiting there in 1910 was alarmed by the "enormous, rudely democratic country" evolving under the influence of the small homesteads that were the normal living units; he feared that czarism and European Russia would soon be "throttled" by the egalitarian currents developing on the frontier.

That the frontier accentuated the spirit of nationalism and individualism in the United States, as Turner maintained, was also true. Every page of the country's history, from the War of 1812 through the era of Manifest Destiny to today's bitter conflicts with Russia, demonstrates that the American attitude toward the world has been far more nationalistic than that of non-frontier countries and that this attitude has been strongest in the newest regions. Similarly, the pioneering experience converted settlers into individualists, although through a somewhat different process than Turner envisaged. His emphasis on a desire for freedom as a primary force luring men westward and his belief that pioneers developed an attitude of self-sufficiency in their lone battle against nature have been questioned, and with justice. Hoped-for gain was the magnet that attracted most migrants to the cheaper lands of the West, while once there they lived in units where co-operative enterprise—for protection against the Indians, for cabin-raising, law enforcement, and the like—was more essential than in the better established towns of the East. Yet the fact remains that the abundant resources and the greater social mobility of frontier areas did instill into fron-

tiersmen a uniquely American form of individualism. Even though they may be sheeplike in following the decrees of social arbiters or fashion dictators, Americans today, like their pioneer ancestors, dislike governmental interference in their affairs. "Rugged individualism" did not originate on the frontier any more than democracy or nationalism did, but each concept was deepened and sharpened by frontier conditions.

His opponents have also cast doubt on Turner's assertion that American inventiveness and willingness to adopt innovations are traits inherited from pioneer ancestors who constantly devised new techniques and artifacts to cope with an unfamiliar environment. The critics insist that each mechanical improvement needed for the conquest of the frontier, from plows to barbed-wire fencing, originated in the East; when frontiersmen faced such an incomprehensible task as conquering the Great Plains they proved so tradition-bound that their advance halted until eastern inventors provided them with the tools needed to subdue grasslands. Unassailable as this argument may be, it ignores the fact that the recurring demand for implements and methods needed in the frontier advance did put a premium on inventiveness by Americans, whether they lived in the East or West. That even today they are less bound by tradition than other peoples is due in part to their pioneer heritage.

The anti-intellectualism and materialism which are national traits can also be traced to the frontier experience. There was little in pioneer life to attract the timid, the cultivated, or the aesthetically sensitive. In the boisterous western borderlands, book learning and intellectual speculation were suspect among those dedicated to the material tasks necessary to subdue a continent. Americans today reflect their background in placing the "intellectual" well below the "practical businessman" in their scale of heroes. Yet the frontiersman, as Turner recognized, was an idealist as well as a materialist. He admired material objects not only as symbols of advancing civilization but as the substance of his hopes for a better future. Given economic success he would be able to afford the aesthetic and intellectual pursuits that he felt were his due, even though he was not quite able to appreciate them. This spirit inspired the cultural activities—literary societies, debating clubs, "thespian groups," libraries, schools, camp meetings—that thrived in the most primitive western communities. It also helped nurture in the pioneers an infinite faith in the future. The belief in progress,



both material and intellectual, that is part of modern America's creed was strengthened by the frontier experience.

Frederick Jackson Turner, then, was not far wrong when he maintained that frontiersmen did develop unique traits and that these, perpetuated, form the principal distinguishing characteristics of the American people today. To a degree unknown among Europeans, Americans do display a restless energy, a versatility, a practical ingenuity, an earthy practicality. They do squander their natural resources with an abandon unknown elsewhere; they have developed a mobility both social and physical that marks them as a people apart. In few other lands is the democratic ideal worshiped so intensely, or nationalism carried to such extremes of isolationism or international arrogance. Rarely do other peoples display such indifference toward intellectualism or aesthetic values; seldom in comparable cultural areas do they cling so tenaciously to the shibboleth of rugged individualism. Nor do residents of non-frontier lands experience to the same degree the heady optimism, the rosy faith in the future, the belief in the inevitability of progress that form part of the American creed. These are pioneer traits, and they have become part of the national heritage.

Yet if the frontier wrought such a transformation within the United States, why did it not have a similar effect on other countries with frontiers? If the pioneering experience was responsible for our democracy and nationalism and individualism, why have the peoples of Africa, Latin America, Canada, and Russia failed to develop identical characteristics? The answer is obvious: in few nations of the world has the sort of frontier that Turner described existed. For he saw the frontier not as a borderland between unsettled and settled lands, but as an accessible area in which a low man-land ratio and abundant natural resources provided an unusual opportunity for the individual to better himself. Where autocratic governments controlled population movements, where resources were lacking, or where conditions prohibited ordinary individuals from exploiting nature's virgin riches, a frontier in the Turnerian sense could not be said to exist.

The areas of the world that have been occupied since the beginning of the age of discovery contain remarkably few frontiers of the American kind. In Africa the few Europeans were so outnumbered by relatively uncivilized native inhabi-

tants that the need for protection transcended any impulses toward democracy or individualism. In Latin America the rugged terrain and steaming jungles restricted areas exploitable by individuals to the Brazilian plains and the Argentine pampas; these did attract frontiersmen, although in Argentina the prior occupation of most good lands by government-favored cattle growers kept small farmers out until railroads penetrated the region. In Canada the path westward was blocked by the Laurentian Shield, a tangled mass of hills and sterile, brush-choked soil covering the country north and west of the St. Lawrence Valley. When railroads finally penetrated this barrier in the late nineteenth century, they carried pioneers directly from the East to the prairie provinces of the West; the newcomers, with no prior pioneering experience, simply adapted to their new situation the eastern institutions with which they were familiar. Among the frontier nations of the world only Russia provided a physical environment comparable to that of the United States, and there the pioneers were too accustomed to rigid feudal and monarchic controls to respond as Americans did.

Further proof that the westward expansion of the United States has been a powerful formative force has been provided by the problems facing the nation in the present century. During the past fifty years the American people have been adjusting their lives and institutions to existence in a frontierless land, for while the superintendent of the census was decidedly premature when he announced in 1890 that the country's "unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line" remaining, the era of cheap land was rapidly drawing to a close. In attempting to adjust the country to its new, expansionless future, statesmen have frequently called upon the frontier hypothesis to justify everything from rugged individualism to the welfare state, and from isolationism to world domination.

Political opinion has divided sharply on the necessity of altering the nation's governmental philosophy and techniques in response to the changed environment. Some statesmen and scholars have rebelled against what they call Turner's "Space Concept of History," with all that it implies concerning the lack of opportunity for the individual in an expansionless land. They insist that modern technology has created a whole host of new "frontiers"—of intensive farming, electronics, mechanics, manu-

facturing, nuclear fission, and the like—which offer such diverse outlets to individual talents that governmental interference in the nation's economic activities is unjustified. On the other hand, equally competent spokesmen argue that these newer "frontiers" offer little opportunity to the individual—as distinguished from the corporation or the capitalist—and hence cannot duplicate the function of the frontier of free land. The government, they insist, must provide the people with the security and opportunity that vanished when escape to the West became impossible. This school's most eloquent spokesman, Franklin D. Roosevelt, declared: "Our last frontier has long since been reached. . . . Equality of opportunity as we have known it no longer exists. . . . Our task now is not the discovery or exploitation of natural resources or necessarily producing more goods. It is the sober, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand, of seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production, of meeting the problem of under-consumption, of adjusting production to consumption, of distributing wealth and products more equitably, of adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people. The day of enlightened administration has come." To Roosevelt, and to thousands like him, the passing of the frontier created a new era in history which demanded a new philosophy of government.

Diplomats have also found in the frontier hypothesis justification for many of their moves, from imperialist expansion to the restriction of immigration. Harking back to Turner's statement that the perennial rebirth of society was necessary to keep alive the democratic spirit, expansionists have argued through the twentieth century for an extension of American power and territories. During the Spanish-American War imperialists preached such a doctrine, adding the argument that Spain's lands were needed to provide a population outlet for a people who could no longer escape to their own frontier. Idealists such as Woodrow Wilson could agree with materialists like J. P. Morgan that the extension of American authority abroad, either through territorial acquisitions or economic penetration, would be good for both business and democracy. In a later generation Franklin D. Roosevelt favored a similar expansion of the American democratic ideal as a necessary prelude to the better world that he hoped would emerge from World War II. His successor, Harry Truman, envisaged his "Truman Doctrine" as a device

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to extend and defend the frontiers of democracy throughout the globe. While popular belief in the superiority of America's political institutions was far older than Turner, that belief rested partly on the frontier experience of the United States.

These practical applications of the frontier hypothesis, as well as its demonstrated influence on the nation's development, suggest that its critics have been unable to destroy the theory's effectiveness as a key to understanding American history. The recurring rebirth of society in the United States over a period of three hundred years did endow the people with characteristics and institutions that distinguish them from the inhabitants of other nations. It is obviously untrue that the frontier experience alone accounts for the unique features of American civilization; that civilization can be understood only as the product of the interplay of the Old World heritage and New World conditions. But among those conditions none has bulked larger than the operation of the frontier process.

## 10. *Beard and the Constitution: The History of an Idea\**

RICHARD HOFSTADTER

It is now more than thirty-five years since the first appearance of Charles A. Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. The story of its reception and criticism is familiar;<sup>1</sup> a large part of its thesis has been absorbed into the main body of American historical writing. Beard himself has both defended it and expounded some of its limitations. While at first even informed and critical minds were deeply shocked by its argument, they are shocked no longer;<sup>2</sup> and although the book has not yet lost every vestige of its controversial urgency, it has entered calmly into history. It has become less and less a book to argue over, more and more a book that must

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<sup>1</sup> On this see Maurice Blinkoff, *The Influence of Charles A. Beard upon American Historiography*, University of Buffalo Studies, vol. 12, pp. 16ff (May 1936); Max Lerner, *Ideas Are Weapons* (New York: Viking Press, 1939) 152-69.

<sup>2</sup> In the ablest of the critical reviews written at the time of publication for example, Professor E. S. Corwin accused Beard of being "bent on demonstrating the truth of socialistic theory of economic determinism as class struggle." (*History Teacher's Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 2 (February 1914), pp. 65-66.) Twenty years later Professor Corwin was writing that the Constitutional Convention "never for a moment relinquished the intention which it cherished from the outset of utilizing the new system for the purpose of throwing special safeguards about proprietary interests." (*The Twilight of the Supreme Court* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934) 53.) See also Corwin's brilliant article, "The Constitution as Instrument and as Symbol," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 30, pp. 1071-85 (December 1936); see especially p. 1072.

be studied if we are to locate our own thinking in the stream of intellectual events.

It is not my purpose in this essay to make another "evaluation" of the book—a task that can now be undertaken profitably and without presumption only by someone who has done massive research in the period with which it deals. I am interested rather in placing the ideas of the volume in their historical context; in calling attention to some of its neglected methodological implications; in discussing a significant ambiguity in its thought; and finally, in tracing the story of Beard's later attitude toward the Constitution as a symptomatic fragment of American intellectual history in the last three decades.

## I

The most deeply rooted of the sources of Beard's economic interpretation and emphasis on class conflict can be found far back in American history. There had been a long tradition of economic materialism and consciousness of class in American political thought, deriving in good part from James Harrington and embracing such writers as James Madison (to whom, of course, Beard was especially indebted), John Adams, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Orestes Brownson, and Richard Hildreth. It would be claiming too much to impute equally to all these writers a systematic espousal of the economic interpretation of history or of the other ideas that formed Beard's early work; but no one thoroughly familiar with American political writing could fail to find in them frequent marginal suggestions of a kind that would point toward Beard's inquiry. Such late nineteenth-century writers as Alexander Johnston, John Fiske, Woodrow Wilson, William Graham Sumner, and Henry Jones Ford had seized upon such suggestions, and each of them anticipated in some respect the thesis that we identify with Beard.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See John Fiske in *The Critical Period of American History* (Boston: Houghton, 1897) 243; Alexander Johnston in his article on the Convention of 1787 in *Lalor's Cyclopedia of Political Science . . .* (New York: Rand, McNally, 1882), vol. 1, p. 638. Woodrow Wilson had pointed out that the Constitution's "plan and structure . . . had been meant to check the sweep and power of popular majorities . . . The government had, in fact, been originated and organized upon the initiative and primarily in the interest of the mercantile and wealthy classes . . . it had been urged to adoption by a minority under the concerted and aggressive leadership of able men representing a ruling class . . . the pressure of a strong and

A second source of Beard's ideas, in the more immediate background, was the Populist movement and the rise of western self-consciousness. The Turner school of historical interpretation was, in a broad sense, the product of a revolt of the West that found its political expression in Populism, its cultural expression in the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, and its literary manifesto in Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols*. Garland declaimed against the provincialism and colonialism of eastern writers and predicted that Chicago would replace Boston and New York as the literary capital of the United States; Turner argued: "The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West." Populism and Bryanism had thrown the clash of debtors and creditors, the antagonism of sections, into bold relief; projected backward into American history, western self-consciousness encouraged concentration on sectional struggles and the history of currency and fiscal policy.

When Beard began work on his book, the Turner school had already produced important monographs, among them William A. Schaper's *Sectionalism and Representation in South Carolina*<sup>4</sup> and Charles H. Ambler's *Sectionalism in Virginia*,<sup>5</sup> both of which contained data of importance to his thesis. But the most relevant product of Turner's seminar was Orin Libby's careful study of *The Geographical Distribution of the Vote of the Thirteen States on the Federal Constitution, 1787-8*, which appeared in 1894. In a preface to this work Turner pointed to the artificiality of state as opposed to sectional boundaries in the study of American history and complained that "the economic interpretation of our history has been neglected." Turner anticipated that a series of studies of "natural economic groupings"

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intelligent class, possessed of unity and informed by a conscious solidarity of material interests." (*Division and Reunion* (New York: Longmans, 1893) 12-13. Henry Jones Ford's *The Rise and Growth of American Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1898) opened its chapter on the Constitution with these words: "The constitutional history of the United States begins with the establishment of the government of the masses by the classes." (P. 59.) William Graham Sumner took a similar view in an essay written in 1896 or 1897; see *Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), vol. 2, pp. 340 ff, especially pp. 349-50.

<sup>4</sup>It appeared in the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1900* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901) vol. 1, pp. 237-463.

<sup>5</sup>Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910.

in American history would be invaluable in studying the political past.<sup>6</sup>

Libby's study, which Beard drew upon heavily, put much emphasis upon the debtor-creditor conflict under the Articles of Confederation. Libby found that the state system under the Articles had acted "as a shield for the debtor classes," that opposition to the Constitution was confined to the interior where "interests were agricultural as opposed to commercial, rural as opposed to urban," that a fundamental reason for calling the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was "a desire to provide for the public necessities as revenue adequate to the exigencies of the Union," and that the victory of the new Constitution was won "by the influence of those classes along the great highways of commerce . . . and wealth . . ." <sup>7</sup>

The social thought of the Progressive era and the intellectual climate encouraged by muckraking constituted a third source of Beard's ideas. Many of the Progressive thinkers, carrying over the old Populist antinomy of the masses versus the classes, were disposed to apply it to the past. V. L. Parrington, whose outlook was shaped by Populism and Progressivism, later declared: "Considered historically perhaps the chief contribution of the Progressive movement to American political thought was its discovery of the essentially undemocratic nature of the federal constitution." <sup>8</sup>

The most important articulation of the Progressive spirit, in this respect, was a book with which Beard was quite familiar—J. Allen Smith's *The Spirit of American Government*—which discussed at length the philosophy behind the Constitution. "Democracy—government by the people, or directly responsible to them—was not the object which the framers of the American Constitution had in view, but the very thing which they wished to avoid," Smith argued. He saw in the document a compromise between the undemocratic aims of the framers and their need to produce a constitution that would be acceptable enough to be ratified. The Constitutional Convention, he concluded, was attended by many illustrious men with a genuine desire to further the welfare of the country as they understood it, but they represented "the wealthy and conservative classes, and had for

<sup>6</sup> Frederick J. Turner in Orin G. Libby, *Geographical Distribution of the Vote* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1894) iii and vii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 49, 50, and 69; see also *ibid.*, 51–52.

<sup>8</sup> Introduction to J. Allen Smith, *Growth and Decadence of Constitutional Government* (New York: Holt, 1930) xi.



the most part but little sympathy with the popular theory of government."<sup>9</sup> Although Smith's view of the Constitution anticipated some aspects of Beard's, it was far less circumstantial. Smith approached the Constitution essentially as a problem in political theory; he hinted at the economic base of the movement for the Constitution but made no attempt to elaborate upon it.

Changes in the social sciences also influenced Beard profoundly. The seminal thinkers of his generation, revolting against the formalistic approach of their predecessors,<sup>10</sup> were reaching out to allied disciplines with fresh enthusiasm and perceptivity. The historical method was gaining ground in law and economics. Advocates of sociological jurisprudence like Holmes and Pound were drawing upon a wide acquaintance with sociology, philosophy, and the history of law. Veblen was studying economic institutions as a sociologist, social psychologist, and historian of ideas. Dewey was elaborating an evolutionary and historical approach to philosophy and arguing for a cultural naturalism. The men of this generation felt themselves united by a common effort to tear through the veil of formalistic speculation—Veblen in his attack on abstract and deductive economics, Pound in his criticisms of static and formalized law, Brandeis in his fight to get the facts of life into the meditations of the Supreme Court, Dewey in his war against formal logic, and Beard in his assault on the juristic approach to the Constitution.

Beard was fully persuaded of the value of this effort to break down the barriers between disciplines. In his study of laws and constitutions he not only used economic and geographical methods then being developed by other historians like William E. Dodd and Frederick Jackson Turner, but also came to the writing of history with a conceptual framework much enriched by such legal and political theorists as Arthur F. Bentley, Frank J. Goodnow, Roscoe Pound, and others.<sup>11</sup> "We are coming to realize," he wrote in 1908,

<sup>9</sup> J. Allen Smith, *The Spirit of American Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), chap. 3, especially pp. 29-32.

<sup>10</sup> On this movement see Morton G. White, *American Social Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1949) especially chap. 2.

<sup>11</sup> This is not a comprehensive inquiry into the sources of Beard's thought; any such undertaking would also note in this connection the influence of such foreign scholars as Frederick W. Maitland, Rudolf von Jhering, Anton Menger, and Rudolf Stammler. See *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1913) 8-9.

that a science dealing with man has no special field of data all to itself, but is rather merely a way of looking at the same things—a view of a certain aspect of human action. The human being is not essentially different when he is depositing his ballot from what he is in the counting house or at the work bench. In the place of a “natural” man, an “economic” man, a “religious” man or a “political” man, we now observe the whole man participating in the work of government.<sup>12</sup>

The incongruity of old legal theory and the changing legal practice of the Progressive era compelled many thoughtful jurists to become aware—as Holmes had long been—of changes in the social foundations of law. There was a growing tendency to interpret the judicial process—and after it every other type of juristic event—in the light of the social and psychological forces that underlay it. As Roscoe Pound wrote in 1910, “Public thought and feeling have changed, and, whatever the law in the books, the law in action has changed with them.”<sup>13</sup> “The history of juristic thought tells us nothing unless we know the social forces that lay behind it.”<sup>14</sup> The sociological movement in jurisprudence turned away from first principles and static generalizations to “pragmatism as a philosophy of law,” making human situations, rather than logic, central.<sup>15</sup> Students of law were driven to the conclusion, as Frank J. Goodnow put it, that a kind of legal opportunism was more likely to be productive of social good than “adherence to general theories which are to be applied at all times.” “This feeling,” he continued, “which has influenced philosophy through the writings of the pragmatic school, has been strengthened by the theory of the economic interpretation of history, which of recent years has been received with so much favor.”<sup>16</sup>

A comparable tendency, in political theory, was the drive to reduce theories of the nature of the state to clashes of concrete social interests rather than clashes of mutually inconsistent

<sup>12</sup> Charles A. Beard, *Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908) 6.

<sup>13</sup> Roscoe Pound, “Law in Books and Law in Action,” *American Law Review*, vol. 44, p. 21 (January 1910).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Pound, “Mechanical Jurisprudence,” *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 8, pp. 609–10 (December 1908); see also Pound, “The Need of a Sociological Jurisprudence,” *Green Bag*, vol. 19, pp. 607–15 (October 1907).

<sup>16</sup> Frank J. Goodnow, *Social Reform and the Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1911) 3.

abstract dogmas. Beard was familiar with Arthur F. Bentley's *The Process of Government*, a vigorous book that traced all legal and political processes to struggles among interest groups. "Law," Bentley wrote, "is activity, just as government is. It is a group process, just as government is. It is a forming, a systematization, a struggle, an adaptation of group interests, just as government is." And everything that could be said about law could be said about constitutions, for "constitutions are but a special form of law."<sup>17</sup>

But if legal and constitutional ideas could be unmasked and reduced to interests and pressures, what would become of abstract juristic theories of the state? Plainly they would be supplanted by empirical inquiry into the origins and development of actual states, not as theoretical repositories of "sovereignty" but as administrative and coercive agencies, whose control was fought for by conflicting social groups. "How," Bentley asked, "can one be satisfied with a theory that comes down hard on the federal Constitution as primarily a great national ideal, in the very face of the struggles and quarrels of the constitutional convention for the maintenance of pressing social interests?"<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that liberals were formulating their own theory of the state, and that Beard's book was in part an attempt to document this theory out of American experience. The liberal theory occupied a middle ground between older formal theories which treated the state as the product of abstract doctrines and beliefs, and the Marxian theory which described it as the naked coercive instrument of the ruling class. To the liberals, as to the Marxists, the state was a coercive agency which expressed social and economic pressures; but the liberals differed from the Marxists in that they did not minimize the importance or possible efficacy of pressure upon the state by groups outside the ruling class. They were satisfied with the more pragmatic conclusion that the state in a parliamentary democracy offers a sort of fluctuating barometric reading that registers all the force brought to bear by various interest groups. "It would seem," wrote Beard,

that the real state is not the juristic state, but is that group of persons able to work together effectively for the accomplishment of their joint aims, and overcome all opposition on the particular point at

<sup>17</sup> Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908) 152, 244, 272, and 295.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

issue at a particular period of time . . . Changes in the form of the state have been caused primarily by the demand of groups for power, and in general these groups have coincided with economic classes which have arisen within the political society.<sup>19</sup>

Marxian socialism, although it had no prominent exponents in academic circles, was winning wider interest in the years after the turn of the century. Most Progressive writers ignored Marx's economic analysis of capitalism and his apocalyptic social predictions but absorbed and used his approach to history. Those later critics of Beard who thought to discredit his work by coupling his name with Marx's<sup>20</sup> were guilty of more than the obvious demagoguery of attempting to refute an idea by invidious association; failing to understand the era in which his important early books had been written, they ignored the congeniality of the economic interpretation of history to the Progressive mind. In 1902 E. R. A. Seligman, soon to be Beard's colleague at Columbia, published a sensible and popular little book, *The Economic Interpretation of History*, in which he observed: "Wherever we turn in the maze of recent historical investigation, we are confronted by the overwhelming importance attached by the younger and abler scholars to the economic factor in political and social progress."<sup>21</sup> Seligman favored a qualified version of the economic interpretation of history (described by Beard eleven years later as being "as nearly axiomatic as any proposition in social science can be"<sup>22</sup>), which he predicted would in the future "occupy an honored place in the record of mental development and scientific progress."<sup>23</sup>

Some socialist writers had produced works that Beard thought "deserved study,"<sup>24</sup> among which he named A. M. Simons' *Social Forces in American History* and Gustavus Myers' *History of Great American Fortunes* and *History of the Supreme Court*. Simons' book contained a crude but clear anticipation of Beard's thesis. "The constitutional convention," he asserted, "was little

<sup>19</sup> *Politics*, 12 and 20.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Theodore C. Smith, "The Writing of American History in America, from 1884 to 1934," *American Historical Review*, vol. 40, pp. 447-49 (April 1935), and Beard's answer, *American Historical Review*, vol. 41, pp. 74-87 (October 1935).

<sup>21</sup> Edwin R. A. Seligman, *The Economic Interpretation of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1902) 86.

<sup>22</sup> *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, 15n.

<sup>23</sup> Seligman, *The Economic Interpretation of History*, 166.

<sup>24</sup> *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, 6n.

more than a committee of the merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and planters, met to arrange a government that would promote their interests."<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that by 1913 the time was ripe for a thorough presentation of the new thesis on the American Constitution.<sup>26</sup> What was still needed was a student of politics and history possessing a bold and free mind, capable of applying systematically the insights of current critical thought, who could turn up fresh data and combine them with a general history of the constitutional period. Beard discovered just such a body of data when he unearthed Treasury Department records that had lain unused for well over a century.

## II

The subject of method can be dealt with briefly in passing. Previous discussion of Beard's book has been purely substantive; both the general economic interpretation of history and Beard's specific version of the struggle over the Constitution have been endlessly debated, but no attention has been given to one of the work's greatest achievements. Methodologically it is a triumph of systematic intelligence. Historical method in America has never taken adequate account of Beard's technique of illuminating a historical movement or event through a composite, quantitative account of the economic and social backgrounds of the personnel involved in it.

What Beard was trying to do in his famous chapter on the economic backgrounds and fiscal holdings of the members of the Convention was to locate their social position as a group, and from this add to our understanding of the adoption of the Constitution as it related to the class structure of late eighteenth-century America. He collected information not only on the holdings of the framers in the public debt, but also on many other relevant factors in their background: the occupations and

<sup>25</sup> Algie M. Simons, *Social Forces in American History* (New York: Macmillan, 1911) 92-96, especially 95-96. Gustavus Myers, *History of the Supreme Court of the United States* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1912), is somewhat more shrill; see chap. 3, especially pp. 129-34.

<sup>26</sup> In reconstructing the intellectual atmosphere in which Beard worked, I have drawn primarily on materials cited in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*. The items cited here by Pound, Goodnow, Bentley, J. Allen Smith, Seligman, Simons, Myers, Schaper, Ambler, and Libby were all referred to in that work.

economic interests of their fathers, their own education, professions, landholdings, political offices, business interests, marital connections, and social status. He was using in 1913 a somewhat rudimentary form of the systematic career-line study, which political scientists and sociologists have begun to use only recently and which American historians have hardly used at all.<sup>27</sup>

Beard's method was unrefined in details, but the broad beginning he made was in itself remarkable. Had his technique been seized upon by his own generation and refined and applied systematically to the major events and movements in American history, the resulting contribution to historical understanding would have been immense. Historical writing today—and I refer

<sup>27</sup> In a certain sense, this sort of systematic study, applied to an intellectual and literary elite rather than political leaders, can be traced at least as far back as Alphonse de Candolle, *Histoire des Sciences et des Savants depuis Deux Siècles* (Geneva: H. Georg, 1885), and Alfred Odin, *Genèse des Grands Hommes* (Paris: H. Wetter, 1895). These works were brought to the attention of Americans by Lester Ward in his *Applied Sociology* (Boston: Ginn, 1906). J. McKeen Cattell, who was at Columbia with Beard, applied a similar method in some early studies in *Science*, n.s., vol. 24, pp. 732-42 (December 7, 1906), and vol. 32, pp. 633-48 (November 4, 1910). Systematic studies have been made of professionals and intellectuals, educators and school boards, labor leaders and businessmen, as well as politicians and bureaucrats. I have not found a study of any body of political personnel that predates Beard's. Among early studies in this field the following are notable: Robert T. Nightingale, "The Personnel of the British Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 24, pp. 310-31 (May 1930); Dale A. Hartman, "British and American Ambassadors: 1893-1930," *Economica*, vol. 11, pp. 328-41 (August 1931); and Harold J. Laski, "The Personnel of the British Cabinet, 1801-1924," *Studies in Law and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), chap. 8. Among the best of the more recent applications of the technique to political personnel have been H. Dewey Anderson, "The Educational and Occupational Attainments of Our National Rulers," *Scientific Monthly*, vol. 40, pp. 511-18 (June 1935); Simon Haxey (pseud.), *England's Money Lords: Tory M.P.* (New York: Harrison, Hilton, 1939); Hans Gerth, "The Nazi Party: Its Leadership and Composition," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 45, pp. 517-41 (January 1940); and Franz Neumann, *Behemoth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942) 365ff. Two challenging recent treatments of the American businessman that suggest similar possibilities for the politician are C. Wright Mills, "The American Business Elite: A Collective Portrait," Supplement V to *Journal of Economic History* (December 1945) 20-44, and William Miller, "American Historians and the Business Elite," *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 9, pp. 184-208 (November 1949). For an informal treatment of a political group, see George E. Mowry, "The California Progressive and His Rationale: A Study in Middle Class Politics," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 36, pp. 239-50 (September 1949).

here not to the narrative art but to the great body of monographic investigation whose tradition is that of the social "sciences"—is still wanting in method, in no small part because of a curious failure to explore the vistas opened by Beard thirty-seven years ago.

### III

The undercurrent of ambiguity in Beard's book is worth dwelling upon at some length, not for the sake of a textual criticism of the volume, but because it may enlarge our understanding of the Progressive mind. This ambiguity is most evident in Beard's long chapter on the economic position of the Founding Fathers, which stimulated more heated criticism than any other part of his book. Was he saying that the Fathers framed the Constitution because they expected to profit by it? Or was he merely saying that the ways in which the Fathers made their profits predisposed them to look at political and constitutional issues from a certain perspective? Was he, as Max Lerner has asserted, "making the economic interpretation theory of men's motives rather than of men's ideas"?<sup>28</sup> Or was he simply trying to show that property holdings were broadly relevant to constitutional and political attitudes?

It was possible to argue either position from the text of the volume itself. At one point Beard asserted: "The overwhelming majority of members, at least five-sixths, were immediately, directly, and personally interested in the outcome of their labors at Philadelphia, and were to a greater or lesser extent economic beneficiaries from the adoption of the Constitution."<sup>29</sup> At another point he stated: "The Constitution was essentially an economic document. . . ."<sup>30</sup>

But there were also passages in which he carefully expressed a much larger view of the matter (passages which his critics too frequently chose to ignore). At the outset of his examination of the economic holdings of the Fathers, he wrote:

<sup>28</sup> Lerner, *Ideas Are Weapons*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, 149; see also p. 188, where he describes the Constitution as "an economic document drawn with superb skill by men whose property interests were immediately at stake . . . [which] appealed directly and unerringly to identical interests in the country at large."

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

The purpose of such an inquiry is not, of course, to show that the Constitution was made for the personal benefit of the Convention. Far from it. . . . The only point here considered is: Did they represent distinct groups whose economic interests they understood and felt in concrete, definite form through their own personal experience with identical property rights, or were they working merely under the guidance of abstract principles of political science?<sup>31</sup>

Again, in summarizing his conclusions at the close of the chapter, he did not declare that the Fathers were working to make money for themselves, but simply that they were not altogether "disinterested"; that they

knew through their personal experiences in economic affairs the precise results which the new government that they were setting up was designed to attain. As a group of doctrinaires, like the Frankfort Assembly of 1848, they would have failed miserably; but as practical men they were able to build the new government upon the only foundations which could be stable: fundamental economic interests.<sup>32</sup>

These passages were undoubtedly entitled to more respectful attention than many critics gave them.

If one were primarily concerned to present a lawyer's case for the book, one could rest it upon these explicit delineations of purpose, arguing that they, rather than any incidental overstatement, should govern the interpretation of the volume. But the presence of the ambiguity goes deeper than this; it is built into the very structure of Beard's research. If he had been primarily interested in the formation of the Founding Fathers' ideas on politics, taking the perspective of their class only as a clue, why was his chapter on their political ideas such a literal-minded compound of scattered quotes from the debates in the Convention? Why was the chapter on the property holdings and economic position of the Fathers so carefully worked out in the context of the economic and political situation of the Confederation, while the formation of the Fathers' ideas on democracy was ignored and the content of these ideas retailed without any effort to place them in the framework of eighteenth-century thought? As between ideas and interests, it is interests that have the foreground in his volume.

Behind this ambiguity in statement, then, lay a real ambiguity

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.



in thought; and behind the ambiguity in thought lay a certain dualism in Beard's position. Something, no doubt, can be attributed to the fact that when revisionist theses appear in the writing of history, they are usually overstated. Something, too, can be attributed to the fact that Beard was a scholar who naturally wished to exploit to the full an enterprising and resourceful discovery among old Treasury Department records. But what was it in the beginning that led him to unearth these dusty records, untouched for more than a century? What was it that made him feel closer to "reality" among old 6 percent securities than in the volumes of eighteenth-century political speculation? The answer must be found in the fact that Beard was not simply a scholar; he was, and remained his life long, a publicist with an urgent interest in the intellectual and political milieu in which he lived. As a young man, in both England and the United States, he had shown himself in sympathy with popular causes and with the current impulse toward social criticism.<sup>33</sup> He could hardly fail to absorb the style of thought of the Populist-Progressive-muckraking era; the limitations, as well as the best insights of that style of thought, left their impress upon his book.

As the most enlightened scholars and journalists of that period saw it, selfish interests had made use of the government to serve private ends, and in so doing had subverted democracy. The problem of journalism and scholarship was to find out how they had done this, to expose the ideas that drew a cloak of protection about them, and to show how their illicit activities had rendered false the genteel picture of society drawn in conventional economics, conventional political science, and conventional fiction. The iconoclasm of the period was concerned with the motives and activities of the rich and established classes. For the most part, it failed to go very far in showing how the spirit of gain that had been so rampant in America had extended to the Progressive elements themselves, to the little businessmen and farmers whose discontents gave the movement its vital surge.<sup>34</sup>

This was, then, an extroverted not an introspective movement.

<sup>33</sup> For Beard's experiences and ideas before 1913, see Bernard C. Borning, "The Political Philosophy of Young Charles A. Beard," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 43, pp. 1165-78 (December 1949).

<sup>34</sup> On this see Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), especially chap. vii.

It was much more concerned with examining and destroying the declining ideas of an earlier age and a discredited order than in evaluating its own. But skill in dealing with the human context of ideas is in large part a by-product of self-evaluation, in which alone the full personal urgency and the psychological dialectic of ideas can be felt. The highest pitch of understanding of the formation of ideas is not likely to emerge in a climate of opinion where intense self-examination has not yet begun. To use Karl Mannheim's terminology, the best thought of the Progressive era was in a transitional state between the theory of ideology and the sociology of knowledge, and in any such age of transition a certain fruitful ambiguity of thought is to be expected. Before one could go very far in examining *how* ideas and interests were related, the point had to be established, and established against considerable resistance, that they were so intimately and universally related that no phase of political life could be exempted from the principle—that a sacred symbol like the Constitution could, at least in this respect, be treated in the same light as a railway franchise.

The common preoccupation of the Progressive political critics, the muckrakers, and the early realistic and naturalistic novelists was the search for "reality." But what, to them, *was* reality? At bottom, I think, it had three characteristics: It was rough and sordid; it was hidden, neglected, and, so to speak, off-stage; and it was essentially a stream of external and material events, of which psychic events were a kind of pale reflex.<sup>35</sup> Reality was the bribe, the rebate, the bought franchise, the sale of adulterated food. It was what one found in *The Jungle*, *The Octopus*, *Wealth versus Commonwealth*, or *The Shame of the Cities*. The imagination of the era was more fundamentally conditioned by reporters and literary journalists than we usually recognize, and its characteristic goal was "the inside story." That is why Beard's book, when it appeared, was so quickly seen to fit into the political context of the twentieth century. It may also help to explain why Beard's rather casual treatment of the political ideas of the Founding Fathers seemed so much more representative of cur-

<sup>35</sup> "In the American metaphysics," Lionel Trilling observes, "reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant. And that mind is alone felt to be trustworthy which most resembles this reality by most nearly reproducing the sensations it affords." *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950) 13; cf. 4-5.)

rent political argument than of the intellectual climate of the late eighteenth century.

#### IV

With the coming of World War I and the passing of the Progressive enthusiasm, the American intellectual climate changed drastically. For different reasons, however, the critical views that had become identified with Beard's work continued to be relevant and appealing to a large public. The Progressives had criticized the American past because they hoped that in the future America could be remade; the intellectuals of the 20s continued to criticize because they needed to explain to themselves why they had lost this hope. Progressivism had extended muckraking backward into the past in order to purify the present; the alienated mood of the 20s accepted muckraking simply because America seemed so wonderfully and extravagantly vulnerable. At a time when such an unsparingly iconoclastic book as W. E. Woodward's study of George Washington—an ideal model of an attack upon the father-image—was being widely read, Beard's critical view of the Constitution period was still appreciated. The two major historical works of the 20s, the Beards' *Rise of American Civilization* and Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, were ideological residues of the Progressive era, and in both, Beard's thesis about the Constitution took a central place.

The growth of a still different intellectual temper in the period of the great depression and the New Deal found the Beard-Parrington synthesis, at the zenith of its appeal, a pervasive expression of the American liberal mind. The class struggle was rediscovered; the vigorous liberal outlook of the Beard-Parrington synthesis and its use of the economic interpretation of history were congenial to the day of popular-front Marxism and sociological literary criticism. In 1938 when the editors of the *New Republic* conducted a symposium on "Books That Changed Our Minds" and asked a number of American liberal intellectuals to suggest titles that ought to be discussed, the two most frequently mentioned titles were Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* and Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, followed by works of Spengler, Freud, Henry Adams, John Dewey, and Parrington. Harold J. Laski

wrote that the works of Beard and Parrington had "opened windows for me into the significance of the American tradition as no other books since Tocqueville."<sup>36</sup>

In 1935, when Beard's book was republished with a new introduction, he naturally felt that it had met the test of time. He pointed out that readers had been warned in advance of its theoretical bias and its emphasis, that its very title had suggested its limits, and that no pretension to completeness of interpretation had been made. He denied that he had ever been committed to "economic determinism," and added, in a curiously casual but sweeping concession to relativism, that his book did not "explain" the Constitution or "exclude other explanations deemed more satisfactory to the explainers." Praising the Founding Fathers for their profound insight into political realities, he urged that they be emulated in their effort to ask, whenever theories of national power or states' rights are propounded, what interests lie behind them and to whose advantage change or stability would operate. "By refusing to do this we become victims of history—clay in the hands of its makers." In December 1937 at a meeting of the American Historical Association celebrating the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Constitution, Beard once again repudiated the notion that "economic considerations determine or explain all history," but argued the case for a realistic approach to constitutional ideas. The next task of constitutional scholarship, he suggested, would be to treat the constitutional attitudes of both interest-groups and historians as problems in the sociology of knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

However, the intellectual milieu was already changing, and on this occasion Beard's view of the Constitution changed with it. The rise of fascism abroad had already caused Americans to look

<sup>36</sup> Counting authors rather than titles, Veblen, mentioned 16 times, came first, and Beard, mentioned 11 times, came second; they were followed by Dewey (10), Freud (9), Spengler and Whitehead (7 each), Lenin (6), I. A. Richards (6), and a scattering for others. Beard himself proposed the writings of Brooks Adams, Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, and Croce's *History: Its Theory and Practice*. See Malcolm Cowley and Bernard Smith, eds., *Books That Changed Our Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 1940) 12, 19-20. When titles were counted, Parrington was referred to 5 times.

There had been a similar triumph for Beard's thesis in the realm of college teaching. Of 42 college texts examined in 1936, 37 had substantially adopted Beard's position on the Constitution. See Blinkoff, *Influence of Charles A. Beard*, 21-36.

<sup>37</sup> Conyers Read, ed., *The Constitution Reconsidered* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938) 159-166.

more and more favorably on their own political institutions, and the Nazi-Soviet pact delivered a stunning blow to Marxism. The rise of the New Deal at home had revived interest in reform, and by making the state a patron not merely of the disinherited classes but also of many artists and writers, had helped to foster a literary and intellectual nationalism that was raised to a still higher pitch during World War II. As the ugly picture of the United States of the 20s faded from view and the far uglier outlines of the twentieth-century world became painfully clear, the American past took on an increasingly roseate light. The re-embracement of America that followed became as intense as the earlier vogue of criticism and expatriation. Van Wyck Brooks, whose *America's Coming of Age* (1915) had struck the dominant note of the disillusionment of the 20s, now turned to the sugary cycle that began with *The Flowering of New England*; John Dos Passos turned from *U. S. A.* to *The Ground We Stand On*; Sinclair Lewis from *Babbitt* and *Main Street* to *The Prodigal Parents*. Even H. L. Mencken in his autobiographical volumes struck a note of sentiment and nostalgia.<sup>38</sup> The fact that Beard, at the moment of growing international consciousness, moved toward a more intense isolationism has obscured the essential conformity of his heightened nationalism with the main trend of the early 40s. When the defense of the United States, as he understood it, became his primary concern, his vision of the American past softened perceptibly.

Writing under the shadow of militarism and dictatorship, Beard became increasingly preoccupied with the task of preserving a form of government that clung to civilian control and decentralized authority. As his original view of the Constitution had taken shape in an age of domestic conflict, his final view was fashioned in an age of world conflict.<sup>39</sup> The struggle of

<sup>38</sup> On the note of nationalism in the 30s, see Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Reynal, 1942), chap. 16.

<sup>39</sup> That Beard was acutely conscious of the historical context of his later thinking on the subject became clear in the chapter he added to his *The Economic Basis of Politics* (1922) on the occasion of its republication in 1945. There he indicated that the economic interpretation of politics, while representing an important note of realism in any social analysis, was far less adequate to the understanding of twentieth-century conditions than it had been to nineteenth-century industrialism, parliamentary democracy, the *pax Britannica*, and the relatively free market economy. Analyzing the implications of the New Deal at home and fascism and militarism abroad, Beard concluded that the growth of state intervention in the modern

classes seemed less important; the process by which constitutionalism could be preserved more vital. *The Republic*, which appeared in 1943 as the nation was preparing for the final effort of the war, reflected his essential satisfaction with the American form of constitutionalism, which he attractively defined as "the civilian way of living together in the Republic." Exploring the historical merits of the American political system, Beard put much weight upon its effectuality in preventing undue concentration of political power and dominance by the military. Considerations not important to him in either edition of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* now seemed to demand a material restatement of the political outlook and aspirations of the framers. "Leaders among the framers of the Constitution," Beard observed, "regarded the resort to Constitutional government instead of a military dictatorship as their greatest triumph. In my opinion they were entitled to view their achievement that way."<sup>40</sup>

At first, Beard explained, he had paid scant attention to evidences of a movement for military dictatorship in the years before the drafting of the Constitution, but as time went on he had found evidences of its importance accumulating in his files. This brought him to

a somewhat different view of the movement for the Constitution. One of the interpretations now generally held is that the Constitution was the outcome of a conflict between radical or agrarian forces on the one side and the forces of conservative or capitalistic reaction on the other. That conflict was undoubtedly raging, and the advocates of the Constitution were involved in it. But I am of the opinion that there were three parties to the struggle. Besides the radicals and the conservatives there was an influential group on the extreme right of the conservatives—a group that was ripe and ready for a resort to the sword. . . . Had the movement for forming a new

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economy had reached a point at which the "political man" is often in a position to give orders to the "economic man" rather than to take them from him. In the United States, for example, the New Deal had made basic economic interests dependent upon the political process to a degree that was significantly different from the conditions of the past. As a result of the rise of fascism and militarism, the "military man" had also entered into full competition with the "economic man" and the "political man" for power over the state. See *The Economic Basis of Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1945) 71-114.

<sup>40</sup> *The Republic* (New York: Viking Press, 1943) 21.

Constitution by peaceful processes failed, there is no doubt in my mind that the men of the sword would have made a desperate effort to set up a dictatorship by arms.<sup>41</sup>

Thus the Constitution appeared not merely as a victory of conservative republicanism over democracy but also of republicanism over military dictatorship—a pertinent theme in 1943.

The best measure of the change from Beard's original view of the making of the Constitution to his later view may be had by comparing the Beards' chapter on the subject in *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927) with that in their *Basic History of the United States* (1944). The difference is not so much structural as it is semantic. The two narratives have a great deal in common, but there are significant omissions in the second account and significantly different verbal formulations. The change in tone is epitomized in the titles; in the first book the account of the struggle over the Constitution is called "Populism and Reaction," in the second, "Constitutional Government for the United States." In the first the authors speak of the political purpose of the framers of the Constitution in erecting a system of checks and balances as "dissolving the energy of the democratic majority." In the second, checks and balances are described as preventing "the accumulation of despotic power in any hands, even in the hands of the people who had the right to vote in elections."

The first, in summarizing the political attitudes of the Founding Fathers, says: "Almost unanimous was the opinion that democracy was a dangerous thing . . . to be given as little voice as possible in the new system . . ." The second describes balanced government as one which would allow "the persistent will of the majority" to prevail; "yet at no time could the 'snap judgment' of a popular majority prevail in all departments of the federal government." The first observes that "More than half the delegates in attendance were either investors or speculators in the public securities which were to be buoyed up by the new Constitution. All knew by experience the relation of property to government." The second characterizes the Convention personnel as a conservative body of "merchants, lawyers, and planters," but refrains from mentioning public security holdings. The first argues that the division of the voters in the ratification of the Constitution ran along economic lines. The second in-

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-26.

dicates that "a tempest of public debate" raged over the merits of the document, but labels its critics in general terms as "radicals" and "friends of liberty," and characterizes its proponents only as "able defenders." The first closes with an exposition of the economic interpretation of politics and group struggle expressed by Madison in *The Federalist*, Number 10. The second drops Madison and closes with the observation that, "without drawing the sword in civil war, without shedding a drop of blood, a new plan of government had been proposed, framed, discussed, and adopted."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *A Basic History of the United States* (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1944) 120, 126-27, 131-32, 136-37, and *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, ed. 1933), vol. 1, pp. 310-11, 315-16, 332-33, 334-35.



## PART FOUR

### Rewriting the American Past

#### *Introductory Notes*

It is a commonplace that every age writes its own history. There is surely enough evidence of this in our day. Every major field of historical study is being substantially reconsidered. The English Revolution of the 1640s is being restyled: from a revolution by a rising gentry, it has now become the desperate outbreak of impoverished squires, or the rush into a power-vacuum of squires no longer controlled by territorial magnates. Seeing the various national developments of the late eighteenth century from the broad perspective of an interrelated North Atlantic community, R. R. Palmer has redesignated these decades as the age of the democratic revolution. In recent years, moreover, the achievements of the Congress of Vienna have been applauded, and Metternich in particular has been praised for having wanted peace, for having sought to create a system of international politics based on reason. The causes of World War I are being reappraised: in the mind of Sidney B. Fay, writing in 1928, the Central Powers could not be held responsible for the coming of the war; in the mind of A. J. P. Taylor, writing in 1954, the responsibility of the Central Powers was unquestionable. Similarly, the American past is being freshly surveyed. The nature of Puritanism, the significance of the Revolution, the contribution of the Founding

Fathers, the meanings of Jacksonian democracy, the causes of the Civil War, the nature of Reconstruction, the achievement of the "robber barons," the essence of progressivism, the relation to American reform of the New Deal: each of these is undergoing basic reinterpretation.

If historians are agreed that every age writes its own history, they are far from agreed on the reasons why, and on the nature of the rewriting. Certainly, the way an age sees its past will reflect its own essential premises, its set of values, its moral imperatives. But to say this is merely to define, not explain. Precisely what are these premises, values, moral imperatives? How does one ascertain just what they are? In what combination of quantity and quality do they shape the writing of history? How far is historical writing an act of conscious choice, how far an act of unconscious acceptance? If a writer finds the moral imperatives of his age unacceptable, should he resist them in writing about the past? What is the nature of the consensus that an era's writing represents, how far is diversity of viewpoint possible within the unity, how far is the unity one of similar rather than identical approaches? Is the great historian of an age, then, one who best sums up its values? Does the new history of each age signify not merely new substance but also new forms, new art no less than new matter?

Some of these questions are considered in the first three of the following essays. Allan Nevins explains why history is regularly rewritten: having recently moved into prominence in world affairs, we are strongly defending the achievements of our society, and are, in particular, seeing the work of the industrial magnates of the late nineteenth century in a new and more favorable light. Matthew Josephson agrees that history is rewritten but questions the new approach to "the robber barons"; defending the writing of Beard, he contends that Nevins's presentation of the past makes "everything come out all white or all black." John Higham suggests that, in their view of the American past, today's historians have come to see "a happy land, adventurous in manner but conservative in substance, and—above all—remarkably homogeneous."

Each of the three essayists brings rich qualifications to the discussion of his subject. Allan Nevins is De Witt Clinton Professor Emeritus of American History at Columbia University, where he taught from 1931 to 1958, and a senior associate of the Henry E. Huntington Library at San Marino. His

biographies of Grover Cleveland and Hamilton Fish won him two Pulitzer Prizes, in 1932 and 1937 respectively. He has written major studies of two of our industrial giants: John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford. His projected ten-volume study of the United States during the Civil War era is surely the most significant of such enterprises in contemporary American historical writing; thus far, six volumes have appeared, and have earned him the Scribner Centennial Prize and the Bancroft Prize. For the novice in history, Professor Nevins has written a superb book of information and instruction, *The Gateway to History* (1938, revised 1962).

Matthew Josephson has staked out his claim to the post-Civil War era in two commanding volumes, *The Robber Barons* (1934) and *The Politicos* (1938). He has achieved fame, too, as the author of several fine biographies, including those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Stendhal, Victor Hugo, and Edison. Not a professionally trained historian, Josephson has contributed much, through his popular histories, to interesting the public at large in significant aspects of the American past. John Higham is professor of American history at the University of Michigan. His *Strangers in the Land* (1955), a study of American nativism during the period 1860-1925, won the Dunning Award. He edited *The Reconstruction of American History* (1962), in which eleven historians survey, in their respective areas of interest, the newer approaches to the American past. His latest volume, *History* (1965), written in collaboration with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, deals with the changing ideas about the study of history which American historians have successively entertained since the rise of the historical profession in the United States. Professor Higham is the author of many articles, each of which bears his hallmark of excellent writing, brilliant analysis, and refreshing insight.

There is, as we have been saying, a vast enterprise in progress among our historians: a reconsideration of every major aspect of the American past. It would be beyond the scope of this volume to include essays on each of these aspects, but some idea about the particulars of the enterprise may be gotten from three essays written, respectively, by three young master historians: Bernard Bailyn, Martin Duberman, and William E. Leuchtenburg. Taken together, the essays reflect the erosion of a larger complex of values and the construction of another. Professor Bailyn, who teaches at Harvard University, suggests

that the American Revolution signified a new relationship between the ideas of the European Enlightenment and actual American political experience. Professor Bailyn is the author of *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (1955) and of *Education in the Forming of American Society* (1960). A leading authority on early American history, he has been, since 1962, editor-in-chief of the John Harvard Library.

Professor Duberman teaches at Princeton University. His life of Charles Francis Adams won the Bancroft Prize in 1962. At work on a biography of the famous poet and abolitionist, James Russell Lowell, Professor Duberman urges that, in reconsidering the abolitionists, we would do well to reconsider the so-called abolitionist personality; a less dogmatic view of the latter would afford us a more valid view of the former. William E. Leuchtenburg, who is professor of history at Columbia University, is among our most prominent writers of recent American history. The essay reprinted here is the final chapter of *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, a volume in the New American Nation Series and winner of the Bancroft Prize for 1963; based on the latest researches, the book is a brilliant re-interpretation of both the achievement of Roosevelt and the nature of the New Deal. Professor Leuchtenburg's other writings include *Flood Control Politics* (1953), which deals with Connecticut River Valley conservation problems in recent decades, and *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (1958), a volume in the Chicago History of American Civilization Series.

Today's rewriting of American history rests on postulates that govern the writing of all history. Drawing the portrait of our past is an act of self-consciousness. It expresses a distinct complex of ideas and values. Describing the roads which Americans have traveled, the historian inevitably takes his view from a point at which they are arriving. His description is a definition of purpose, an explanation of success, an essay in morality. It proceeds from a calculus of good and bad, it defines national goals, it assays the means by which the goals have been realized. An American history is in this way an American ideology.

Like any national history, an American history is an appraisal of the symbols and ideas which are universally considered as defining the nation. An account of our past is an estimate of the American ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy, of what each has meant at different points of our history, of how each has been realized, and of its importance and

validity vis-à-vis the other ideals. Today's estimate and today's history are new. Understanding just how they are new and the reasons why is one of the real challenges facing the student of American historical writing.

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## 11. *Should American History be Rewritten?\**

I. ALLAN NEVINS: *Yes*

One curious thing about history, as Philip Guedalla said, is that it really happened. Another curious fact about history is that while it was happening nobody really understood its meaning.

John Fiske, pausing one day in his young manhood before the window of Little, Brown & Co. in Boston, saw a volume within entitled "Pioneers of France in the New World" and noted that its author was identified as the man who had written "The Conspiracy of Pontiac." He remembered that when that earlier volume appeared he had wondered whether Pontiac was a barbarous chieftain of medieval Europe. He recalled also that some teacher at Harvard had once expressed the view that the French and Indian War was a dull squabble of no real significance to students of history. Passing on, Fiske wondered why anyone should write about French pioneers in America. He lived to pen an essay on Francis Parkman which not only placed that author at the head of American historians (where he yet stands), but recognized that the epic significance of the struggle of Britain and France for the mastery of North America—a significance which Parkman had first expounded—could hardly be overstated. An interpretation of our continental history which nowadays we assume no child could miss had been beyond the grasp of the brilliant young John Fiske in the 1860's.

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The idea that history can ever be so well written that it does not need rewriting can be held only by those foolish people who think that history can ever ascertain exact truth. It cannot. We can go further than the assertion of that truism: we can say, "Fortunate for history that it cannot ascertain exact truth!" If history were a photograph of the past it would be flat and uninspiring. Happily, it is a painting; and, like all works of art, it fails of the highest truth unless imagination and ideas are mixed with the paints. A hundred photographs of London Bridge look just alike and convey altogether a very slight percentage of the truth, but Turner's Thames and Whistler's Thames, though utterly different, both convey the river with a deeper truth.

All parts of our history are always being rewritten; no segment of it, from 1492 to 1952, is not now in need of vigorous rewriting. Whenever an expert applies himself to the scrutiny of a special area he at once sounds a lusty call for more searching exploration of the terrain. Douglas Freeman, carrying Washington through the Revolution, agreed with Bernhard Knollenberg, writing a history of that war, that every part of the Revolutionary struggle needs the most searching re-examination and the boldest reinterpretation Merrill Jensen states in the preface to his study of the Confederation that the entire period 1783-1789 demands a study that will embrace every state and every act of Congress. There are men who believe that the historical study of the Civil War period has only just begun—and they are right. Margaret Leech, now completing a study of the McKinley Administration, is convinced that a hundred research workers should be set to exploration of the dark nooks and secret crannies of the time.

"In vain the sage, with retrospective eye," wrote Pope, "would from the apparent what conclude the why." The three main reasons why history constantly needs reinterpretation include something more than the impossibility of ever learning all the truth about all the motives and actions of the past.

The chief of the three reasons is the need of every generation for a reinterpretation to suit its own preconceptions, ideas, and outlook. Every era has its own climate of opinion. It thinks it knows more than the preceding era; it thinks it takes a wider view of the universe. Every era, too, is affected by cataclysmic events which shift its point of view; the French Revolution, the Metternichian reaction, the movement for national unification in Italy, the United States, and Germany, the apogee of Man-

chester Liberalism, and so on down to the multiple crisis of our atomic age. We see the past through a prism which glows and sparkles as new lights catch its facets. Much of the rewriting of history is a readjustment to this prism. George Bancroft's spectrum was outmoded a few years after his laborious "last revision"; Charles A. Beard's begins to be outworn today, for we now possess what Beard would have called a new frame of reference.

As a second reason, new tools of superior penetrative power are from time to time installed in the toolshed of even our rather unprogressive race of historians. Our council for research in the social sciences (it should be studies) justly emphasizes the value of overlapping disciplines. Much could be said for the contention that the best historians nowadays are prepared in some other field than that of history. Thus Wesley Clair Mitchell, the historian of the greenbacks, of business cycles, and of the ebb and flow of economic activity, whose National Bureau of Economic Research inspired so much fruitful historical writing, was trained as an economist. (He also was trained by John Dewey, who gave courses under all sorts of titles, but "every one of them dealt with the same subject—how we think.") Beard was trained as a political scientist. Parrington was trained as a student of literature. Carl Becker was trained in European history but wrote in the American field. James Henry Breasted was first trained in theology, a fact which stood him in good stead when this pioneer of Egyptology in America began to trace the development of conscience and religion in the Ancient East. Not one historian in fifty knows as much as he should of the tool called statistics, or of psychology, or of economic geography, or of ecology. The kinship between Halford J. Mackinder, the geographer, and Frederick J. Turner, the historian, in loosing seminal ideas showed what the geographer could learn from history, and the historian from geography.

But the third great reason why history is rewritten is simply because the constant discovery of new materials necessitates a recasting of our view of the past. We might think that this would one day cease, but it never does. Everyone who has laboriously mapped any historical subject appreciates the impact of new facts upon that map, blurring some lines and defining new ones. Happy are those who live to rewrite their books, as Parkman rewrote one of his—"LaSalle and the Great West." One would

have said that all the materials for a history of the Revolution had been assembled in print by the innumerable agencies, local, state, and national, devoted to that effort, but Freeman assures us that the great archives like the Massachusetts Historical Society, the American Philosophical Society, and the main state libraries bulge with unstudied documents. One would have said that all the material for the history of the Confederate War Office had been studied and restudied; but, behold!, the diary of the third officer of that department, Kean, is suddenly deposited in the University of Virginia, and we find it possible to make a sweeping reassessment of the Southern military administration.

Thus, the idea that history is photography is set at naught. It is art; it constantly requires a new mixture of pigments, new points of view, new manipulation of light and shade; and as an art it presents an endless challenge to the writer who perceives that the highest truth of history will always transcend a statement of fact; that, indeed, historical fact is but a foundation for the truth won by imagination and intellectual power.

The best history is always interpretive, but this does not mean that the best history is consciously or ostentatiously interpretive. The work of the historical masters, from Thucydides to Trevelyan, illustrates the fact that interpretation is most effective when implicit rather than explicit. The true historical attitude is a search for truth about a situation, force, or event—the War of 1812, the Abolitionist impulse, Pearl Harbor—which slowly, painfully, accurately dredges up an unforeseen interpretation. That is, history properly operates by the inductive, not the deductive, methods. The merit of an Olympian historian like Parkman is that he says in effect: "Let us collect and collate all the relevant facts and find what conclusions emerge from their impartial analysis." The cardinal weakness of a controversialist historian like Beard is that he repeatedly gave the impression—perhaps falsely—of having said to himself: "Let us take this provocative theory of the truth, and see how impressive an array of facts we can collect in its support." Ideas in history, that is, should be applied in subordination to the ascertainment of all the facts, and not in control of the ascertainment of one picked body of facts. Hence it is that nothing could be more absurd than to try to predict in advance the interpretations to be applied to our history by future writers—who will certainly go their own

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way. But we may legitimately make some guesses—they are not prophecies, but mere guesses, offered with due modesty—as to the drift of some of the new interpretations.

As American history lengthens and the past falls into longer perspective, we tend not so much to discard major interpretations entirely as to place new ones beside them; not so much to substitute one simple synthesis for another as to embrace old monistic views in a new and complex synthesis. During the first century of our national history, 1775–1875, three great dominant developments lift themselves above all others. They are the establishment of American Independence, political, economic, and finally cultural, from Europe; the westward movement for the conquest and development of the continent; and the abolition of slavery and a Southern way of life in a civil war which vindicated national unity. Some students, to be sure would select other elements in our historical fabric, but three special students out of five and nine lay readers out of ten would, I believe, choose these. Now it is evident to a cursory view that each of the three lent itself at first to a simple monistic interpretation, expounded in the work even of subtle historians; and that within one or two generations this simple view of the past was replaced by a dual or multiple interpretation. What had been a flat telescopic image was given depth and reality by a stereopticon lens.

Thus it was that the old simple view of the Revolution as a politico-military struggle was amplified and enriched by subsequent views of the Revolution as a great movement for social and institutional change of a purely internal character. The old simple view of the conflict of North and South as centering in the slavery struggle was widened and deepened by later treatments of that collision as arising also from the increasing moral, social, economic, and cultural differences between the two sections. The old simple view of westward expansion as significant for what the pioneer did in changing the wilderness was immensely enlarged by Turner's thesis that a greater significance lay in what the wilderness did in changing the pioneer.

Nowadays the character of a fourth great development, accomplished and sealed in the last fifty years of our national life, can hardly be missed. On that new phase of our history, too, general agreement will perhaps be found. We have become first a great world power, and then *the* great world power. We have

moved first into the open arena of world affairs, and then into the very center of that arena. We now view our national past from the vantage-point of this new turn, and with the changed perspective which it gives us.

Just as John Fiske saw our history from 1607 to 1789 as an evolutionary preparation for the gift of practical democracy and the Anglo-American principle of self-government to the world in the shape of our Constitution and Federal system; just as Von Holst saw the whole period from 1776 to 1861 as a preparation for the vindication of human liberty and national unity; so now we have historians who view our whole national life as an unconscious preparation for the time when we should become Protector of the Faith for all democratic peoples; when, having turned away from Western European affairs until we gained first place among the nations, we returned to them as the pivot and support of Western European civilization. These writers regard American history not in terms of the Western continent, but in terms of an Atlantic community. We find, indeed, that we never left that community; that the Seven Years' War was our first world war, the Revolution our second; that we have but awakened to our consciousness of a global role. And when these historians write of our national future they speak not of short-term objects, but of what Lincoln called "man's vast future."

This tremendous change of the past forty or fifty years—this emergence of America to the leadership of the Western World—will undoubtedly affect our children's children, and the long generations to come, in the most sweeping way. It will loom up in time to come as tremendously as the great changes which preceded it—as the Revolution internal and external, the American conquest of the frontier and the frontier's conquest of the American, the death of slavery and the birth of machine industry. But the full significance of this development will not become evident until it, too, is given the dual or multiple interpretation that historians gave these older developments. We shall not understand its essential character until all the accompanying phenomena, social, economic, and intellectual, have been analyzed, and some mind as electric as Parrington's and as penetrating as Turner's has pierced nearer its heart. What then will be its significance? That is a question we cannot answer; it is for the oncoming generation of historians.

My own guess is that this great development by which America has been projected into world leadership, with all the ex-

hilarations and perils, the opportunities and costs of that position, may in some fashion be connected by future interpreters with the advent of an age of mass action, mass production, and mass psychology in American life. From being one of the most unorganized, the most invertebrate of nations in 1860 we have grown into the most powerfully and efficiently organized people on the globe. Our population of 160,000,000 disposes of its resources through such mass combinations, political, social, and economic, as mankind never saw before. Our thinking in 1865 was still individual thinking; today it is largely mass thinking, shaped and colored by mass media of unparalleled and sometimes dismaying potency—press, radio, television, cinema. No one can go to what were recently primitive frontier communities in America—say Texas and California—without being struck, and a little appalled, by the complexity and efficiency with which they have organized their life. It was our mass production which won the two last world wars; it was our genius for making big organizations work which has built the means for saving Western democracy since the latest world war. Our national outlook, once that of the individualistic pioneer, has become a social outlook. Without this pervasive internal change our new position in the world would have been impossible.

The striking shift in our character and our world position in the last half century, of course, has some direct results, already visible, in our interpretation of history. We are evincing a greater militancy in asserting the virtues of our political and social system. The apologetic attitude of the years of the Great Depression is gone. We can henceforth be more confident, and more energetic, in asserting that our way of life, called decadent by our enemies, has proved itself historically to be freer, more flexible, and more humane than any other in history. We can be as emphatic and frank as ever in describing our past weaknesses, from slavery to slums, but we shall insist more rigorously on the fundamental healthiness of our system and on its proved ability to mend its defects and give us a constantly self-regenerating society.

We shall also evince, I think, a tendency to insist more emphatically on the fundamental unity of the United States with Western Europe and the various other nations sprung from Western Europe. All kinds of Western institutions and virtues now find their principal stronghold in the United States. The

literature written in the English tongue increasingly has its main center of vitality in America, a fact well recognized by the London *Times Literary Supplement*. The Roman Catholic Church, like the Protestant churches, finds its chief springs of wealth and power in the United States. The Atlantic Community, as many publicists term it, has taken the place of the former division between Europe and the Americas. Oldtime quarrels between America and Western Europe have lost a great part of the significance which was once attached to them. What does the War of 1812 count for compared with the maintenance and growth of the political, social, and cultural ties that have made the English-speaking nations so nearly a unit? The nationalistic view of our history will increasingly be replaced by the international view, treating America as part of a great historic civilization with the Atlantic its center, as the Mediterranean was the center of the ancient world; the tides of population, power, and influence first moving from Europe to America, and then beginning to flow in the opposite direction.

We may look forward, also, to a more appreciative attitude toward our material strength, and to a more scientific treatment of the factors which have created this material power. In the past our historians were apologetic about this. They condemned our love of the dollar, our race to wealth, our interest in material objects; they deprecated our worship of size, and deplored our boastfulness about steel tonnage, grain production, and output of machinery. Clio, with her tradition of devotion to moral values, was scornful of any others. Our writers in general—for the historians but followed the poets, the novelists, and the dramatists—intimated that America had grown too fast, too coarsely, too muscularly; they exalted the rural virtues as against industrial might, the rarefied air of the study as against the smoky atmosphere of the mill.

Without denying that some accompaniments of our swift industrialization were atrociously bad we can now assert that this historical attitude was in part erroneous. The nation grew none too fast. We can see today that all its wealth, all its strength were needed to meet a succession of world crises—and we still dwell in a crisis era. Had we applied restrictions to keep our economy small, tame, and timid we would have lost World War I. Had the United States not possessed the mightiest oil industry, the greatest steel industry, the largest automotive factories, the

most efficient machine-tool industry, the best technological schools, and the most ingenious working force in the world, we would indubitably have lost World War II.

Were we significantly weaker today in technical skills, in great mills and factories, and the scientific knowledge which gave us priority with the atomic bomb and hydrogen bomb, all Western, Europe would be cowering—we ourselves would perhaps be cowering—before the knout held by the Kremlin. The architects of our material growth—the men like Whitney, McCormick, Westinghouse, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Hill, and Ford—will yet stand forth in their true stature as builders, for all their faults, of a strength which civilization found indispensable.

That Jay Gould deserves the unscientific term "robber baron" is doubtless true. Nobody can object if similar malisons are heaped on such other disreputable businessmen as Collis P. Huntington, Bet-a-Million Gates, and Frenzied-Finance Lawson. Industry, like politics, has its bad men and dark chapters, and it has long been easy to get a spurious reputation for "courage" by dilating on them. The *real* courage, however, is required by those who argue that we should approach our business history with discrimination, balance, and a concern for scientific analysis of all the evidence. The forthcoming multi-volumed history of the Standard of New Jersey by members of the Harvard School of Business Administration will show that Rockefeller and his successors were guiltless of many of the charges flung at them, and in organizing the incredibly chaotic oil business performed a work not destructive, but essentially constructive. Andrew Carnegie, who did so much to build the nation's steel industry, cannot be dismissed with the term "robber baron." Nor can James J. Hill, whose Great Northern contributed so much to Northwestern growth. Nor can Henry Ford, who lowered prices, raised wages, and in 1911-1914 brought to birth at Highland Park the complex creative process called mass production, which, widely applied, has done so much to make life richer and Western democracy stronger. As the era of muck-raking fades the era of a true history of our industrial growth—not apologetics, not abuse, but scientific appraisal, giving blame and credit where each is due—can open. And the credit side of the ledger far outweighs the debit.

It will yet be realized that the industrial revolution in the United States came none too soon, and none too fast; and that



the ensuing mass production revolution as yet so little understood by Americans was not born a day too early. We shall also come to realize that the turmoil and human suffering which inescapably accompanied the industrial revolution and the mass-production revolution were not, after all, a tremendous price to pay for their benefits. The price was smaller in the United States than in foreign lands. The industrial revolution cost less in human travail here than it did in England, where it first came to birth; less than in Germany or Japan; far less than it is costing in Russia. Here is a wide field for the rewriting of American history, and for the re-education of the American people, who should have a fair presentation of the facts in place of tendentious writing.

Our material might, to be sure, is valuable only as it supports, and carries to victory, great moral ideas; only as it buttresses a civilization in which spiritual forces are predominant. But the fundamental difference between the democratic world and the totalitarian world lies precisely in the superior position which we give to moral and spiritual values. It is we, not our enemies, who have the right to talk about what Lincoln called man's vast future, for we really value men as individual souls. Behind our dreams of man's vast future we mobilize an unconquerable strength. In time, when future historians look back on this period, which to us is so full of struggle, sacrifice, and anxious uncertainty, they will perhaps give it an interpretation of no mean character. They may say: "The era in which the United States, summoning all its strength, led democracy in winning the First World War, the Second World War, and the ensuing struggle against the Communist tyranny, was one of the imposing eras of history. It stands invested, in its own fashion, with something of the radiance of the Periclean era, the Elizabethan era, and the era of Pitt and the long struggle against Napoleon."

## II. MATTHEW JOSEPHSON: *No*

When Professor Nevins read the foregoing paper before the Society of American Archivists in Dearborn, Michigan, the newspapers rose to the significance of certain passages in it as foreshadowing a new fashion in our historical writing. These

were quoted very widely, in some cases, under fairly alarming headlines, such as that in *The New York Times* for September 20, 1953:

REWRITING HISTORY IS URGED BY NEVINS

Our writers and scholars had been growing a bit edgy at reports of the banning and burning of books and of the predations of Senator McCarthy and his "literary department" in the republic of letters. Now came news that Professor Nevins was out to "rewrite" some of our recent history and it gave many persons quite a turn. He has been saying much the same things for several years and with less reservation or prudence than in the Dearborn lecture. In the 1953 edition of his biography of John D. Rockefeller ("A Study in Power"), as earlier, in August 1951, before a meeting of history teachers at Stanford University, he had asserted that many of our contemporary writers had done grave injustice to

. . . the leaders of our material growth—the Rockefellers, Carnegies, Hills, and Morgans. . . . In the past our historians tended to a feminine idealism. They were apologetic about our dollars, our race to wealth, our materialism. . . . They spoke scornfully of the robber barons who were not robber barons at all: they intimated that America had grown too fast.

Professor Samuel Eliot Morison, president of the American Historical Association, sounded the same notes last year in an address before that learned body. He assailed the tendency to the "economic interpretation" of our history as exemplified by Charles Beard, and he went to great lengths to castigate the "debunkers" who in the 1930's and 1940's, by their excessively critical spirit, as he argued, often insulted our "folk-memories," stripped America's "great figures" of all virtue, all nobility, and in fact of their greatness. Mr. Morison, therefore, urged that our damaged heroes should be salvaged from the historical junk heaps where they had been consigned, that they be patched up, varnished, and made to look like real antiques. At the same time *Fortune* magazine, which candidly glorifies our large corporate enterprises, in April 1952 published a long article by E. N. Saveth surveying the many injuries done to the reputation of our business class by American historians old and new, from Parkman and Prescott, down to Henry Adams, Beard, and the other so-called "muckrakers." All this had made for "bad" public relations and needed much correcting, *Fortune* noted, if

businessmen were to avoid new reform measures by the Government.

These facts are mentioned to indicate the context in which Professor Nevins dropped his latest remarks on how our history should be rewritten. It has all added up to quite a campaign. Assuredly, "every era has its own climate of opinion," as he observes. The present (though by a narrow electoral margin) has assumed some of the character of a Restoration, with our own Stuarts and Bourbons coming in again where they left off. The "revisionists" of history are now much concerned that our masters of heavy industry and finance be given their due.

How different was the climate of 1933 when, as it happened, I wrote my own study of our nineteenth-century industrialists and, in a spirit of good clean fun, entitled it "The Robber Barons." There were some fifteen millions unemployed in our cities; our farmers were up in arms literally; our most prominent financiers were being investigated or tried or were in flight abroad. Never were the creative contributions of our big business leadership rated so low. As for the term "robber barons," it was not of my own coinage, but was drawn from the folklore of the Kansas Greenbackers and Populists of the 1880's who had their experience with the Jay Gould type.

Today is a different day, and the prevailing trade winds in this country drive us toward mental conformity. Our university scholars are but made of flesh. Even the Justices of the Supreme Court, it has been long said, "follow the election returns" in handing down their opinions. Should historians lag far behind in judging the shift of political power to conservative hands? Reflecting upon Mr. Nevins's timely advice that we assume "a more appreciative attitude" toward the architects of our prosperity and progress, we can imagine whole flocks of historians, large and small, hastening to change their old liberal lights for new. Where only a decade or two ago they, like Mr. Nevins himself, were fairly strong for the New Deal, we may fancy them, henceforth, writing panegyrics on the wisdom, courage, and moral beauty of FDR's enemies, the economic royalists.

The talk of rewriting our history inevitably brings to mind the nightmare vision of George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four," with its regiments of poor intellectual helots in the labyrinthine skyscrapers of the Ministry of Truth retouching records, destroying old documents, removing all trace of liberal and democratic

ideas. Orwell's anti-utopian fantasy was, of course, based on the Nazi creation of a Federal Institute for the History of the New Germany and on the revision of the history of Soviet Russia under Stalin's direction. Will the New History of this country, too be rewritten as crude propaganda for the party in power? Will Franklin Roosevelt be trimmed down to size—say that of Calvin Coolidge—and Henry Ford be given wings and a harp? Will the art of Tacitus, Voltaire, and Gibbon be reduced to a public-relations job?

Perish the thought. The last person to recommend such a program would be Allan Nevins, who has long conducted himself as a sincere democrat. But his proposals for "revision" have been to my mind ill conceived and ill timed. Ill timed because these are days when the works and ideas of some of our most creative thinkers, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Veblen, and John Dewey, have come under suspicion and attack by overheated patriots. Ill timed because history books long esteemed and profitably studied have been banned; because many writers and teachers of history show increasing fear to use their faculties on the materials and lessons of the past. Mr. Nevins's example, termed in some university circles "a harbinger of coming revisionism," will scarcely spread courage.

To be sure, history is always being rewritten. As Benedetto Croce said: "All true history is contemporary history." We write not for the dead but for the living. Yet in the past, change in the art has been a slow alembic process carrying it away from myth, romance, and superstition toward an ever more rational chronicle of the past. Thucydides vowed that he would eschew romance. Gibbon, as a man of the Enlightenment, rewrote the early Christian historians; and the men of the "scientific" school of Ranke in the next century tried to correct Gibbon. But seldom before have serious historians come with proposals to lay aside the tools of exact knowledge and place important figures of the past in the setting of romance or myth.

The revisionists have singled out Beard for punishment, because he was stubbornly unromantic about our tycoons and, as they contend, contributed more than almost any other to the formation of a skeptical attitude toward our institutions among the intellectuals of the 1930's and 1940's. His highly documented "Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution," as Dr. Morison would now say, "debunked" the Founding Fathers.

Here, by a semantic device, the word "debunk" is used in the pejorative sense. But is it not honorable to eliminate bunk or buncombe? Is America not great and strong enough to do without Washington's cherry tree and Sheridan's fictitious ride? Beard's best-known work, "The Rise of American Civilization," done in collaboration with his wife, described the industrial revolution after the Civil War and the coming of the great monopolies in a coolly critical spirit. Most intelligent Americans of that era generally regarded the men of the trusts and the railway combinations with intense fear and said, with Henry Adams, that Rockefeller, Morgan, and the trusts were "doing their best" to bring on a social revolution. The masters of industry and finance were, after all, hauled into court year after year as "conspirators" against the rights of other American businessmen and farmers to engage in competitive enterprise; and the politicians of both major parties vied with each other in enacting laws regulating the monopolists. Nevins does not deny all this, but holds that Beard was not "objective"; that he wrote of the "barons" of pork, oil, or sugar with the *parti pris* of an economic determinist; that the Rockefellers were "better" than Beard and his intellectual kin believed, or worked better than they knew to build up empires in industry or mass-production plants that transformed an agrarian America into the world's most powerful industrial nation.

To be sure, Charles Beard began his studies during the spectacular industrial and political conflicts of the 1890's; he was influenced, moreover, when he studied at Oxford, by the Fabian Socialists, as well as by the reading of Marx. In those days the concept of economic determinism, broadly speaking, was embraced even by scions of banking families like Professor E. R. A. Seligman. It seemed to be embodied in the career of John D. Rockefeller himself, as even Nevins pictures it. By means regarded as "morally indefensible," he relates, by use of secret railroad rebates and espionage, the "anarchy" of small, competitive oil producers was ended and order and efficiency introduced into their field. A business world of small weak units was made "inevitably" to give way to a world of concentration and highly organized power. "Great business aggregations are not built without frustrating, crushing, or absorbing multitudinous small enterprises," concludes the modern apologist of Rockefeller. The historical concepts of Marx—aside from his advocacy of Socialism—have permeated our culture so generally for a hundred

years that one finds Nevins unconsciously echoing one of the most familiar of Marxian doctrines: that which sees the rising capitalist class as an agency of progress leading to the triumph of "scientific" and large-scale industry.

Our Rockefellers, then, were not "morally worse" than their contemporaries of the Gilded Age, in Nevins's view, and above all should not be judged by the ethical standards of the present era. By their very ruthlessness in business, terrible even for that "loose period," he holds, they were enabled to build with all the greater speed a vast oil empire that would one day, in wartime, help save our country. Here one finds a philosophy of economic materialism in no way different from that which Beard, in earlier life, embraced—save that Beard preserved always a moral balance somewhat wanting in our current crop of revisionists. And if Dr. Nevins is going to teach us to "appreciate" or condone the moral ruthlessness of our older captains of industry, if he is going to let the end always justify the means, then I fail to see what arguments we can bring to bear against the Russian Communists. Reinhold Niebuhr was quite right in his recent observation (in "The Irony of American History") that our conservative apologists for unbridled monopoly, for the American way of materialistic life, are little better than the Communists.

There was nothing "effeminate" about Beard's idealism. That, incidentally, was the kind of accusation usually directed at reformers by the old corrupt political bosses of the General Grant era, like Roscoe Conkling. Beard was a prodigious worker, forever mining for his facts. He was not "any one thing" in his beliefs, and with time his views changed. But in writing the history of a country where most people had come to improve their material lot he would have been a dull-witted historian indeed if he had ignored the economic motive. In the long run his work stands in the mainstream of the modern pragmatists and sociologists. He desired to turn historical writing away from the mere chronicle of "past politics" or the doings of "great men" or famous diplomats and write of the people, of man in society, of the many-sided growth of a national culture or "civilization." And, far from belittling the role of those who, for private gain, usurped natural resources, acquired or built railroad nets, and organized huge industries, he insisted that they were in truth the prime actors, the dominant figures in the post-Civil War scene, beside whom Presidents and Senators were but animated shadows. Long years before Nevins approached the oil or auto-

motive industries Beard asserted that the rise of a House of Rockefeller or Morgan was as important a subject for American historians as that of the House of Howard or Burleigh for the English.

Nevins's books, like his article urging the rewriting of our history, are after all but the expressions of his own partiality for the "leaders" of our industrial progress. In truth, they were never beloved or popular as folk-heroes as were our military leaders, great inventors, famous preachers, silver-tongued orators, and picturesque newspaper editors of the Horace Greeley type. If we would return to our folklore then the real American tradition is after all reflected by our earlier "literary" historians as well as by the later social-minded ones who expressed habitual distaste rather than adulation for the men of fortune. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., who as a railroad president saw a good deal of them, wrote in his autobiography: "Not one that I have ever known would I care to meet again either in this world or the next . . ." And in these days of the "businessmen's Administration" in Washington it is well to recall the statement of one intensely American historian of half a century ago who said: "In no other country was such power held by the men who had gained these fortunes, the mighty industrial overlords. . . . The Government was practically impotent. . . . Of all forms of tyranny the least attractive and the most vulgar is the tyranny of mere wealth." Was it a Socialist who spoke? No, it was a Republican, a President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. He preferred as his heroes men like Peary, the explorer, or Bury, the historian, not the financial magnates. It was Roosevelt who said: "I am simply unable to make myself take the attitude of respect toward the very wealthy men that many persons show nowadays . . ."

Beard, the chief target of the revisionist, maintained in his later years, in quite un-Marxist fashion, that the writing of completely "objective" history was an impossibility in view of the problem of selection, proportion, and emphasis that came into play. History thus became something like an "act of faith." The historian began always with an "assumption" or a "scheme of reference." One might fix upon the theme of the struggle of church and state as the *leitmotiv* of the period studied; another upon the clash of great interest groups and institutions. But we can never reproduce the past, in Ranke's words, "as it really was."

Nor does Allan Nevins. In the concluding part of his article one finds a series of historical guesses or "assumptions" about the past and future that seem as visionary or speculative as anything in George Bancroft or Parson Weems. In his closing vaticinal phrases everything comes out all white or all black. On the one side are the plumed knights of business who were "the architects of our material progress"; on the other the dragons of totalitarianism, German, Russian and Chinese. Had we applied "restrictions," that is, state controls, upon the masters of industry, he writes, we should have lost World War I. And but for the men who organized "the mightiest oil industry, the greatest steel industry, the largest automotive factories . . . we would indubitably have lost World War II." Thus, he paints a picture all dripping with glamour of the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and Fords, conjuring up the industrial arms with which to defend democracy and lead the "Atlantic Community" in a crusade against the totalitarians of the East. This is a fairly *simpliste*, big-business version of the American Century. And this, he tells us, is the direction in which the rewriting of our history is to be carried out.

But what does the corpus of ascertainable facts reveal? To those who were in a position to study the defense program being launched in 1940-1941 it was plain that all too many leaders of our industry, for two years after war had come to Europe, stubbornly resisted the conversion of their plants for the manufacture of arms, or delayed providing added plant capacity, until the Government, under Franklin Roosevelt, agreed to subsidize a large part of such conversion or expansion by allowing very rapid depreciation rates for tax purposes. Today even conservative economists, such as Galbraith of Harvard University, acknowledge the truth that the swiftest and greatest expansion of our industry and our labor productivity took place *not* under the free-enterprise rules of peacetime, but in wartime under the indispensable Government planning, control, and priority restrictions.

Was "Uncle Henry" Ford thinking of the American Century when—prior to Pearl Harbor—he flatly refused to build aircraft engines for the hard-pressed British? One wonders what Ford's idea of history was. "The bunk," he said.



## 12. The Cult of the "American Consensus": Homogenizing Our History\*

JOHN HIGHAM

In retrospect, it is becoming apparent that the decade of the 1940's marked a fundamental change of direction in the exploration of the American past. At the time nothing very unusual seemed to be happening in the minds of American historians, in spite of the clamor in the world around them. The usual outpouring of conventional monographs continued. Our endless fascination with the pageant of the Civil War produced a new but not a very different crop of narratives. There was, to be sure, a rising volume of criticism of the giants who had dominated American historical scholarship in the period between the wars: Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles A. Beard, and Vernon L. Parrington. But the image they had fixed on the screen of the American past had only begun to dissolve. As late as 1950, when Henry Steele Commager's *The American Mind* carried our intellectual history down to date in the spirit of Parrington, the result sounded only a trifle old-fashioned.

In the last few years, however, the critical attacks of the 40's have matured into a full-scale reappraisal of the main themes in American history. The great trio of yesteryear have gone into eclipse. Their vision of an America in which democracy, vaguely associated with the West, battled against entrenched economic privilege no longer seems basic enough to define the shape of our national development. On the whole, the distinctive interpretations of Turner, Beard, and Parrington no

\* Reprinted with permission from *Commentary*, XXVII (February, 1959), 93-100.

longer appear persuasive enough to evoke really lively controversy. They linger on, flattened and desiccated, in the pages of many a textbook, where they may occasionally inflame the Daughters of the American Revolution, the *Daily News*, and others who specialize in discovering the menace of dead issues. Meanwhile, our living historical awareness has moved so far from the interests of Turner, Beard, and Parrington that interpretive historians now feel less need to criticize or defend them than to supersede them.

Giants being notoriously oversized, no one has yet stepped into their shoes. The new books that are giving us an altered sense of who we are lack either the scale or the density or the architectural strength that history of the first order of importance must have. Still, some lively work is being done. Some important books that try to fit fragmentary research into a new pattern, plausible to contemporary sensibilities, are being written. The dominant image they project bears few resemblances to the turbulent picture that prevailed before the 1940's.

An earlier generation of historians, inspired by Turner, Beard, and Parrington and nurtured in a restless atmosphere of reform, had painted America in the bold hues of conflict. Sometimes their interpretations pitted class against class, sometimes section against section; and increasingly they aligned both sections and classes behind the banners of clashing ideologies. It was East vs. West, with the South gravitating from one to the other; farmers vs. businessmen, with urban workers in the pivotal position; city vs. country; property rights vs. human rights; Hamiltonianism vs. Jeffersonianism. These lines of cleavage were charted continuously from the Colonial period to the present. They gave a sense of depth to the social struggles which historians in the early 20th century observed all around them.

The divisions between periods loomed as large as those between groups. Among scholars attuned to conflict, American history appeared jagged and discontinuous. Historians like Beard had an eye for the convulsive moments in history, and they dramatized vividly the turning points when one side or the other seemed to seize control. To them, America had had several revolutions, usually triumphant over formidable resistance, and always big with unfulfilled promise. They saw the revolution of 1776 not simply as a war for independence but as a drastic redistribution of power within the Colonies. They called the Civil War the "Second American Revolution," and in be-

tween they acclaimed the "Revolution of 1800," when Jefferson came to power, and the militant rise of the common man behind Andrew Jackson. There was, of course, the Industrial Revolution, followed by the heroic Populist Revolt; and similar social conflicts throughout the Colonial period caught their attention.

With some lapse of consistency these connoisseurs of change often played down the newness of the New Deal. The closer they looked to the present, the more clearly they observed the traditional elements in a movement of protest. The issues of their own day, they knew, were anchored in a long heritage, the changes no more than might be expected; the transitions of the past looked much more radical. Over all, however, the crises of American history stood out as the milestones of progress, when men shed outworn beliefs and remade their institutions in response to the demands of a changed environment.

In contrast, the new look of American history is strikingly conservative. More than at any time before, historians are discovering a placid, unexciting past. To an impressive degree, the dominant interpretations have recaptured the spirit of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* has emerged in recent years from a characteristic neglect during the early 20th century. As Tocqueville did more than a century ago, today's historians are exhibiting a happy land, adventurous in manner but conservative in substance, and—above all—remarkably homogeneous.

For one thing, current scholarship is carrying out a massive grading operation to smooth over America's social convulsions. The American Revolution has lost its revolutionary character, becoming again what genteel historians had always said it was: a reluctant resistance of sober Englishmen to infringements on English liberties. We have learned that the Jacksonians yearned nostalgically to restore the stable simplicity of a bygone age, and that the Populists were rural businessmen deluded by a similar pastoral mythology. Paradoxically, we have even grown conservative enough to recognize fairly radical changes in the recent past and so to probe, with Richard Hofstadter, for elements of social revolution in the New Deal. Hofstadter's very influential book, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (1955) neatly reverses the older views. It presents Populism in the 1890's and Progressivism in the early 20th century

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not as mighty upheavals but as archaic efforts to recapture the past. On the other hand, it shows the New Deal as an abrupt break with the past.

Among earlier crises, the Civil War alone has resisted somewhat the flattening process. Yet a significant decline has occurred in the number of important contributions to Civil War history from professional scholars. One is tempted to conclude that disturbances which cannot be minimized must be neglected. On the other hand, the growing attraction of the Civil War to journalists suggests that it provides a larger public with a kind of surrogate for all of the other dramatic moments that historians are deflating.

By reducing the importance of these turning points, the newer interpretations have enabled us to rediscover the continuity of American history, the stability of basic institutions, the toughness of the social fabric. The same result is also being attained by dissolving the persistent dualisms, which Parrington and Beard emphasized, and substituting a monistic pattern. Instead of two traditions or sections or classes deployed against one another all along the line of national development, we are told that America in the largest sense has had one unified culture. Classes have turned into myths, sections have lost their solidarity, ideologies have vaporized into climates of opinion. The phrase "*the American experience*" has become an incantation.

To fill in its meaning, historians have joined social scientists in a new fascination with the concept of national character. Since definitions of national character necessarily concern the pervasive, persistent features of a whole culture, progressive scholars distrusted them. Today, however, the study of national character brings out the unifying effects of forces that formerly impressed us as disruptive. Thus David Potter's *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954) advances an economic interpretation of our similarities instead of our differences. Whereas the generation of Parrington and Beard had explained basic cleavages on economic grounds, Potter shows our wealth shaping our common ways of life.

Of course, the new interpreters have to face a considerable amount of real strife at various times in the history of the nation. They must also recognize that many Americans at such times have *thought* their country cleft between "haves" and "have-nots." But an emphasis on the belief can help to minimize

the reality. A psychological approach to conflict enables historians to substitute a schism in the soul for a schism in society. Certainly present-day scholars tend to subjectivize the stresses in American life. Divisions, which the previous generation understood as basic opposition between distinct groups, turn into generalized psychological tensions running through the society as a whole. John Dos Passos's bitter outburst in the 1930's—"all right we are two nations"—becomes the record of a state of mind. An able synthesis of recent research on the age of the great tycoons explains the popular outcries against them as a projection upon one group or responsibility for the rapid industrial changes into which all were thrown.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, when historians today write critically, they scrupulously avoid singling out any one segment of the population for blame. They either criticize the myths and stereotypes that have exaggerated the differences between competing groups; or they attack our uniformities and hanker for more variety. Louis Hartz, in what was perhaps the most outstanding of the new interpretive books, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (1955), worried because we have no other tradition. A regime of freedom has had so unchallenged a sway in America, Hartz contended, that most American political debate has been shadow-boxing. "America must look to its contact with other nations to provide that spark of philosophy, that grain of relative insight that its own history has denied it."

Hartz's own sympathies lay with dissent and diversity. He was clearly disturbed by the soporific intellectual implications of the liberal consensus he described. To take full advantage of the new monolithic approach to American history would require a point of view much more complacent, much less internationally oriented, and much less respectful of the value of ideas. About the time when Hartz was first publishing the early chapters of his book in scholarly journals, Daniel J. Boorstin was making a similar but more drastic revision of American history in a conservative direction. Boorstin wrote in a mood thoroughly in tune with the unphilosophic harmony which he and Hartz were independently appraising.

A slim volume of lectures published in 1953, *The Genius of*

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (1957).

*American Politics*, stated the essence of Boorstin's thesis. Ostensibly, the book concerned a relatively limited problem: why has America produced almost no systematic, fundamental political theory? Boorstin was not the first, of course, to brood over this question. Most American intellectual historians try pretty hard to deny the charge. Boorstin, however, had no apologies to make. He presented this supposed shortcoming as a triumphant demonstration of our success as a nation. With sour, sidelong glances at Europe, he argued that Americans did not need basic theories. Having no deep antagonisms, they could dispense with metaphysical defenses. Never having repudiated their past, they could discuss their problems as lawyers rather than political philosophers. American values had emerged from happy experience; here the "ought" derived from the "is." In the 20th century, he admitted, Americans could no longer take themselves for granted; but let them not therefore try to acquire an ideology and become crusaders. American political thought need only consult the wisdom imbedded in our historic institutions. In spite of the author's contempt for European theory, a bit of Edmund Burke proved useful in the end.

This celebration of the mindlessness of American life came from no provincial lowbrow. Boorstin is one of the very few native students of American history who possesses European culture, and participates in it with easy familiarity. A Rhodes Scholar, a student at various times of the humanities and the biological sciences, a barrister of the Inner Temple, author of a study in English intellectual history, he knows of what he scorns. Yet the view he advanced in *The Genius of American Politics* cannot be dismissed simply as an intellectual's self-hatred—the perversity of a man somehow driven to revulsion from what he has cherished. The book was more than this. It crisply summarized and foreshadowed the new trend of American historiography: the appeal to homogeneity, continuity, and national character. Above all, it swept aside the characteristically progressive approach to American intellectual history as a dialectic of warring ideologies.

Louis Hartz was already doing the same thing in the articles later reprinted in his *Liberal Tradition in America*, though Hartz's appraisal showed the intellectual deficiencies produced by the homogeneity and continuity of American society. Having no such qualms about our supposedly one-track culture, Boorstin

went a step beyond Hartz. The latter at least conceded to America one system of ideas; Boorstin admitted none at all.

In their different but overlapping ways, the two books sketched the general outlines of an anti-progressive interpretation of American history. While other scholars were rewriting specific episodes in the story, Boorstin and Hartz revised the plot. Boorstin did not leave the matter there, however. He has now come forth with the first volume of a projected trilogy, ambitiously entitled *The Americans*,<sup>2</sup> which brilliantly elaborates the thesis stated in his previous book. The new volume ranges lightly but learnedly across the Colonial period. Far from being confined to political forms, about which it says relatively little, it has sections on religion, science, the professions, styles of speech, the press, and the art of war. On each of these subjects Boorstin presses the central theme that America flourished by scrapping European blueprints, dissolving the social and intellectual distinctions of European life, and moving toward a homogeneous society of undifferentiated men. The whole work amounts to a running demonstration that a naive practicality enabled Americans from a very early date to unite in a stable way of life, undisturbed by divisive principles.

Let it be said at once that this first volume seems to me a collection of sparkling fragments rather than an enduring monument, a fascinating miscellany rather than a grand achievement. Though clearly the most provocative book of the year in American history, it selects waywardly—even willfully—an assortment of topics for the illustration of a thesis which is both too simple and too elusive to embrace the complex experience of a nation. Since Boorstin's book assumes the continuity of American history, it has none itself. Since it revels in the unsystematic character of American culture, it has little plan or system. It is a series of incisive, original improvisations, which never become a symphony. (From the author's point of view the metaphor may be unfair: symphonies are European, he likes jazz.)

Boorstin's ingenuity in turning intellectual limitations into social virtues never flags. Beginning with the Puritans, he promptly deflates the exaggerated claims recently made for their philosophic stature. Having done their creative thinking in

<sup>2</sup> *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*, Random House, 434 pp., \$6.00. An excerpt from this volume appeared in *Commentary*, October 1958.

Europe, they could concentrate in America on organizing a community. Having a wilderness at their doorstep, they could expel dissenters and so did not need to think out fine-spun theories of toleration. Having the Bible and the English common law to guide them, they could act on precedents instead of losing themselves in utopian abstractions. Whereas other writers have liked the Puritans for their piety or disliked them for their fanaticism, Boorstin loves their sober practicality.

The one American group that is roughly handled in this generally indulgent book is the Quakers. They represent resistance to the American way of life: they refused to bend religious principle to social expediency. Focusing as always on men's attitudes rather than their ideas, Boorstin presents the Quakers as self-righteous dogmatists in their mental habits in spite of the absence of dogma in their formal creed. As missionaries, they panted after martyrdom instead of seeking converts. As rulers of Pennsylvania, they sacrificed some humane legislation and otherwise abdicated responsibility in order to preserve their personal purity. Through these unworldly and un-American proclivities, the Quakers grew insular toward their neighbors and so failed to become "undifferentiated" Americans. To make matters worse, they remained cosmopolitan in spirit and so failed to achieve a "good" kind of insularity, i.e., from Europe. Nothing is said of Quaker leadership in the anti-slavery movement, and almost nothing of their religious toleration, doubtless because these activities were too deep-dyed in principle. Boorstin acclaims toleration in Virginia because it arose there from a practical compromising spirit, not from any theory; he tells us that intolerance in Massachusetts was "useful" in maintaining the unity of the community; but for either tolerance or intolerance as a principle his book has no place.

This is too thoughtful a book to ignore consistently the dangers of the opportunistic and parochial qualities it celebrates. Particularly in the final section, dealing with military institutions, the debits of a short-sighted amateurism are plainly entered. This is also too widely informed a book to rest entirely on the soundness of its general argument. Some of the topics treated here, such as the practice of medicine and of law in the Colonies, have hitherto received the attention of only a few specialists. Although the experts will undoubtedly pick at many of Boorstin's statements, any reader who can control his exasperation at the anti-intellectual bias of the book will find



arresting insights into phases of early American life that diverged significantly from English patterns. On the whole, I know of no other book that combines so effectively a grasp of large features of American culture with the intimate, functional detail that makes a social order come to life.

Yet the deeper one goes in this book, the more perplexed one becomes about the criteria it applies in measuring American achievements. The notion that a "pragmatic temper" distinguishes American culture, setting it apart from the bookish and contemplative culture of Europe, is one of our commonest national stereotypes. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner lyricized "that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends." The same image of America was held by most of the progressive historians whose views Boorstin has clearly undertaken to revise. Is his perspective really much different from that of an old-fashioned liberal pragmatist, devoted to a tough-minded respect for experience?

Often the outlook seems very similar indeed. Like Parrington and Beard, Boorstin associates belles-lettres with an aristocratic society, an oppressive class system, and a stagnant regime of privilege. Like John Dewey's philosophy, Boorstin's history celebrates the empirical thinker-doer who is uninhibited by the formal learning of the past—the early American physician, for example, who was fortunately unschooled in the learned ignorance of European medicine. Like any good pragmatist, Boorstin identifies America with innovation, experiment, and a fluid response to the novelties of experience. His democratic rhetoric sometimes exceeds that of the pragmatists themselves: his image of the American as an "undifferentiated man" harks back to Whitman's glorification of the "divine average."

But the substance of this book bears no consistent relation to these rhetorical overtones. If we look at what Boorstin is really writing about, we find very little evidence of experimentation, no innovations except those which circumstances forced the colonists to make, and almost no interest on the author's part in democracy in any positive sense. One of the best sections of the book discusses the extraordinary standardization that the English language underwent in America under the influence of English literary models. To describe this linguistic uniformity as "the vernacular for equality" helps along one part of the

argument of the book, but hardly testifies to innovation or experiment. As for the theme of equality, another section of the book lovingly describes the Virginia aristocracy, whose special virtue according to Boorstin lay in maintaining an English aristocratic pattern in a businesslike and unreflective way. Or, to take another example, consider the section entitled "A Conservative Press." It begins by saying that Colonial printers could serve the general public since they did not need to print good books; it ends by showing that the printers actually served the ruling groups who subsidized and controlled them.

Clearly, the pragmatism that informs this bland approval of American institutions resembles only superficially the fighting faith we used to know. For the true pragmatist—for James and Dewey and all their tribe—intellectuals played a creative role in history. Ideas were precious tools for attaining practical ends. Consequently, being "practical" meant continually and deliberately adapting existing institutions to changing problems. For Boorstin, however, thought does not guide behavior, behavior defines thought, or makes it unnecessary. To him, the practical is the traditional, but for Americans only. Experiment is our hallowed prejudice, our native American orthodoxy. It is our way of conforming to circumstances, and this way seems to Boorstin all the more agreeable because it does not, like European conservatism, enshrine an otiose set of principles. In this view, the pragmatic virtues lose what little consistency they once had and all connection with a larger universe of values. Instead of furnishing any sense of direction at all, they become fossilized exhibits in our national museum. Activity turns into possession, and our pragmatic habits supply a symbol of acquiescence to any circumstances that can be labeled as distinctively American.

How did this larcenous seizure of pragmatic attitudes for the sake of a conservative historiography come about? The author of *The Americans* did not always write with such affection for the expedient and such scorn for theories. In 1948 he published *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*, a searching examination of the structure and assumptions of Jeffersonian thought. In that book he took abstract principles very seriously indeed. There he explored the philosophical results of the American pragmatic temper—and found them dangerous. The main emphasis fell on Jefferson's undervaluing of the reflective side of human nature: "the desire to get things done predominated over the need to be at peace with God and oneself." This book

maintained that Jefferson's distrust of metaphysics mired him in intellectual confusion, and that his materialistic premises led ultimately to the moral obtuseness of modern American thought. Now, through an extraordinary reversal, the vices imputed to Jefferson have become the virtues of America. With incredible virtuosity Boorstin has furnished a new map of American history with each spin of his own intellectual compass.

To understand this about-face, it may help to note that both books have a deeply conservative character, though in different ways. *The Lost World* rests on a philosophical conservatism. It might almost have been written by a neo-Thomist, for essentially it accuses the liberal tradition, which stretches from Jefferson to Dewey, of lacking humility in the face of God and history. *The Americans*, on the other hand, grows out of an empirical conservatism, which rejects all ideologies in the name of long-established institutions. The earlier book implies that we need a conservative philosophy. The recent one tells us that we have something much better: a conservative way of life.

The shift from one position to the other reflects, I think, a change of fashion in conservative thinking. During the late 1940's and early 1950's a good many intellectuals with historical interests were trying to define a tradition of conservative thought in America. Historians had for so long canonized a succession of liberal heroes that the first reaction to the new postwar mood was to create a competing pantheon of conservative luminaries. Books by Russell Kirk, Clinton Rossiter,<sup>3</sup> and other intellectual historians revealed that a number of American thinkers had respected original sin and had opposed the official cult of progress. Boorstin's *Lost World* fell in with this effort, though it contributed negatively by exposing the alleged failure of the liberal tradition.

Before long, however, the attempt to establish the value of a European type of conservatism in the American environment petered out; we hear very little of it today. The campaign had too obviously polemical a flavor and too unreal a taste: a tempest in an academic teapot. Great faith was required to believe that men like George Fitzhugh, Orestes Brownson, and Irving Babbitt ever had much profundity or any considerable impact. The really massive conservatism of American business-

<sup>3</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Santayana* (1953); Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (1955).

men, politicians, and even most intellectuals, as we were discovering, spoke in the common language of the Enlightenment. Liberals and conservatives no longer seemed clearly distinguishable. As the ideological gap between them appeared to shrink, and as a mood of acquiescence spread in all quarters, the need to vindicate a conservative intellectual tradition disappeared. When the liberal ideology lost its cutting edge, conservatives ceased to require an ideological shield.

At this point a historiography that was conservative, without passing as such, won out. Instead of upholding the role of the right in America, it merges the left with the right. It argues that America has ordinarily fused a conservative temper with a liberal state of mind. It displays, therefore, the homogeneity and the continuity of American culture. Writing sympathetically about the intellectual conservatism of today, Eric McKittrick has recently pointed out that it stresses the power of institutions; it has no ideological case to make—except, one might add, a case against ideologies. Boorstin, in his last two books, has joined this school, and, in a sense, has taken the lead.

The advantages of this point of view for American historians have not been slight. It has enabled them to cut through the too easy dualisms of progressive historiography. It is inspiring them to do important and original work in understanding American institutions. They should continue to do so. The conservative frame of reference, however, creates a paralyzing incapacity to deal with the elements of spontaneity, effervescence, and violence in American history. Richard Chase, one of the few literary critics who has successfully defied the current mood, has recently called attention to the wildness and extravagance that characterized the outstanding American novels. Similar qualities have shaken our society, from the Great Awakening of the 18th century to the Great Red Scares of the 20th, in spite of its sturdy institutional structure. They deserve more than patronizing attention.

Moreover, contemporary conservatism has a deadening effect on the historian's ability to take a conflict of ideas seriously. Either he disbelieves in the conflict itself (Americans having been pretty much of one mind), or he trivializes it into a set of psychological adjustments to institutional change. In either case, the current fog of complacency, flecked with anxiety, spreads backward over the American past.

It is not likely in the near future that many critical scholars

will emphasize the polarities that fascinated the great progressive historians, nor is it desirable that they should. Certainly no one contends today that the debate between Jefferson and Hamilton, or between human rights and property rights, frames our intellectual history. But to stand Parrington and Beard on their heads does not solve the problem. American thought has had other dialectical patterns, which the present cult of consensus hides. Above all, perhaps, that cult neutralizes some moral issues that have played a not entirely petty or ignoble part in the history of the United States. To rediscover their grandeur and urgency, historians do not need the categories of Beard and Parrington, and can probably do without their now debased pragmatic philosophy. But we pay a cruel price in dispensing with their deeper values: an appreciation of the crusading spirit, a responsiveness to indignation, a sense of injustice.

### 13. *Political Experience and Enlightenment Ideas in Eighteenth-Century America\**

BERNARD BAILYN

The political and social ideas of the European Enlightenment have had a peculiar importance in American history. More universally accepted in eighteenth-century America than in Europe, they were more completely and more permanently embodied in the formal arrangements of state and society; and, less controverted, less subject to criticism and dispute, they have lived on more vigorously into later periods, more continuous and more intact. The peculiar force of these ideas in America resulted from many causes. But originally, and basically, it resulted from the circumstances of the prerevolutionary period and from the bearing of these ideas on the political experience of the American colonists.

What this bearing was—the nature of the relationship between Enlightenment ideas and early American political experience—is a matter of particular interest at the present time because it is centrally involved in what amounts to a fundamental revision of early American history now under way. By implication if not direct evidence and argument, a number of recent writings have undermined much of the structure of historical thought by which, for a generation or more, we have understood our eighteenth-century origins, and in particular have placed new and insupportable pressures on its central assumption concerning the political significance of Enlightenment thought. Yet the need for rather extensive rebuilding has not been felt, in part

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because the architecture has not commonly been seen as a whole—as a unit, that is, of mutually dependent parts related to a central premise—in part because the damage has been piecemeal and uncoordinated: here a beam destroyed, there a stone dislodged, the inner supports only slowly weakened and the balance only gradually thrown off. The edifice still stands, mainly, it seems, by habit and by the force of inertia. A brief consideration of the whole, consequently, a survey from a position far enough above the details to see the outlines of the overall architecture, and an attempt, however tentative, to sketch a line—a principle—of reconstruction would seem to be in order.

A basic, organizing assumption of the group of ideas that dominated the earlier interpretation of eighteenth-century American history is the belief that previous to the Revolution the political experience of the colonial Americans had been roughly analogous to that of the English. Control of public authority had been firmly held by a native aristocracy—merchants and landlords in the North, planters in the South—allied, commonly, with British officialdom. By restricting representation in the provincial assemblies, limiting the franchise, and invoking the restrictive power of the English state, this aristocracy had dominated the governmental machinery of the mainland colonies. Their political control, together with legal devices such as primogeniture and entail, had allowed them to dominate the economy as well. Not only were they successful in engrossing landed estates and mercantile fortunes, but they were for the most part able also to fight off the clamor of yeoman debtors for cheap paper currency, and of depressed tenants for freehold property. But the control of this colonial counterpart of a traditional aristocracy, with its Old World ideas of privilege and hierarchy, orthodoxy in religious establishment, and economic inequality, was progressively threatened by the growing strength of a native, frontier bred democracy that expressed itself most forcefully in the lower houses of the “rising” provincial assemblies. A conflict between the two groups and ways of life was building up, and it broke out in fury after 1765.

The outbreak of the Revolution, the argument runs, fundamentally altered the old regime. The Revolution destroyed the power of this traditional aristocracy, for the movement of opposition to parliamentary taxation, 1760–1776, originally controlled by conservative elements, had been taken over by extremists

nourished on Enlightenment radicalism, and the once dominant conservative groups had gradually been alienated. The break with England over the question of home rule was part of a general struggle, as Carl Becker put it, over who shall rule at home. Independence gave control to the radicals, who, imposing their advanced doctrines on a traditional society, transformed a rebellious secession into a social revolution. They created a new regime, a reformed society, based on enlightened political and social theory.

But that is not the end of the story; the sequel is important. The success of the enlightened radicals during the early years of the Revolution was notable; but, the argument continues, it was not wholly unqualified. The remnants of the earlier aristocracy, though defeated, had not been eliminated: they were able to reassert themselves in the postwar years. In the 1780's they gradually regained power until, in what amounted to a counter-revolution, they impressed their views indelibly on history in the new federal Constitution, in the revocation of some of the more enthusiastic actions of the earlier revolutionary period, and in the Hamiltonian program for the new government. This was not, of course, merely the old regime resurrected. In a new age whose institutions and ideals had been born of revolutionary radicalism, the old conservative elements made adjustments and concessions by which to survive and periodically to flourish as a force in American life.

The importance of this formulation derived not merely from its usefulness in interpreting eighteenth-century history. It provided a key also for understanding the entire course of American politics. By its light, politics in America, from the very beginning, could be seen to have been a dialectical process in which an aristocracy of wealth and power struggled with the People, who, ordinarily ill-organized and inarticulate, rose upon provocation armed with powerful institutional and ideological weapons, to reform a periodically corrupt and oppressive polity.

In all of this the underlying assumption is the belief that Enlightenment thought—the reforming ideas of advanced thinkers in eighteenth-century England and on the Continent—had been the effective lever by which native American radicals had turned a dispute on imperial relations into a sweeping reformation of public institutions and thereby laid the basis for American democracy.



For some time now, and particularly during the last decade, this interpretation has been fundamentally weakened by the work of many scholars working from different approaches and on different problems. Almost every important point has been challenged in one way or another.<sup>1</sup> All arguments concerning politics during the prerevolutionary years have been affected by an exhaustive demonstration for one colony, which might well be duplicated for others, that the franchise, far from having been restricted in behalf of a borough-mongering aristocracy, was widely available for popular use. Indeed, it was more widespread than the desire to use it—a fact which in itself calls into question a whole range of traditional arguments and assumptions. Similarly, the Populist terms in which economic elements of prerevolutionary history have most often been discussed may no longer be used with the same confidence. For it has been shown that paper money, long believed to have been the inflationary instrument of a depressed and desperate debtor yeoman-

<sup>1</sup> Recent revisionist writings on eighteenth-century America are voluminous. The main points of reinterpretation will be found in the following books and articles, to which specific reference is made in the paragraphs that follow: Robert E. Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1955); E. James Ferguson, "Currency Finance: An Interpretation of Colonial Monetary Practices," *William and Mary Quarterly*, X (Apr. 1953), 153-80; Theodore Thayer, "The Land Bank System in the American Colonies," *Journal of Economic History*, XIII (Spring 1953), 145-59; Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton, N. J., 1957); George A. Billias, *The Massachusetts Land Bankers of 1740* (Orono, Me., 1959); Milton M. Klein, "Democracy and Politics in Colonial New York," *New York History*, XL (July 1959), 221-46; Oscar and Mary F. Handlin, "Radicals and Conservatives in Massachusetts after Independence," *New England Quarterly*, XVII (Sept. 1944), 343-55; Bernard Bailyn, "The Blount Papers: Notes on the Merchant 'Class' in the Revolutionary Period," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XI (Jan. 1954), 98-104; Frederick B. Tolles, "The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement: A Re-Evaluation," *American Historical Review*, LX (Oct. 1954), 1-12; Robert E. Brown, *Charles Beard and the Constitution: A Critical Analysis of "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution"* (Princeton, N. J., 1956); Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago, 1958); Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953), and *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958). References to other writings and other viewpoints will be found in Edmund S. Morgan, "The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XIV (Jan. 1957), 3-15; and Richard B. Morris, "The Confederation Period and the American Historian," *ibid.*, XIII (Apr. 1956), 139-56.

ry, was in general a fiscally sound and successful means—whether issued directly by the governments or through land banks—not only of providing a medium of exchange but also of creating sources of credit necessary for the growth of an underdeveloped economy and a stable system of public finance for otherwise resourceless governments. Merchants and creditors commonly supported the issuance of paper, and many of the debtors who did so turn out to have been substantial property owners.

Equally, the key writings extending the interpretation into the revolutionary years have come under question. The first and still classic monograph detailing the inner social struggle of the decade before 1776—Carl Becker's *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (1909)—has been subjected to sharp criticism on points of validation and consistency. And, because Becker's book, like other studies of the movement toward revolution, rests upon a belief in the continuity of "radical" and "conservative" groupings, it has been weakened by an analysis proving such terminology to be deceptive in that it fails to define consistently identifiable groups of people. Similarly, the "class" characteristic of the merchant group in the northern colonies, a presupposition of important studies of the merchants in the revolutionary movement, has been questioned, and along with it the belief that there was an economic or occupational basis for positions taken on the revolutionary controversy. More important, a recent survey of the writings following up J. F. Jameson's classic essay, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926), has shown how little has been written in the last twenty-five years to substantiate that famous statement of the Revolution as a movement of social reform. Most dramatic of all has been the demolition of Charles Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913), which stood solidly for over forty years as the central pillar of the counterrevolution argument: the idea, that is, that the Constitution was a "conservative" document, the polar opposite of the "radical" Articles of Confederation, embodying the interests and desires of public creditors and other moneyed conservatives, and marking the Thermidorian conclusion to the enlightened radicalism of the early revolutionary years.

Finally, there are arguments of another sort, assertions to the effect that not only did Enlightenment ideas not provoke native American radicals to undertake serious reform during the Revo-

lution, but that ideas have never played an important role in American public life, in the eighteenth century or after, and that the political "genius" of the American people, during the Revolution as later, has lain in their brute pragmatism, their successful resistance to the "distant example and teachings of the European Enlightenment," the maunderings of "garret-spawned European illuminati."

Thus from several directions at once have come evidence and arguments that cloud if they do not totally obscure the picture of eighteenth-century American history composed by a generation of scholars. These recent critical writings are of course of unequal weight and validity; but few of them are totally unsubstantiated, almost all of them have some point and substance, and taken together they are sufficient to raise serious doubts about the organization of thought within which we have become accustomed to view the eighteenth century. A full reconsideration of the problems raised by these findings and ideas would of course be out of the question here even if sufficient facts were now available. But one might make at least an approach to the task and a first approximation to some answers to the problems by isolating the central premise concerning the relationship between Enlightenment ideas and political experience and reconsidering it in view of the evidence that is now available.

Considering the material at hand, old and new, that bears on this question, one discovers an apparent paradox. There appear to be two primary and contradictory sets of facts. The first and more obvious is the undeniable evidence of the seriousness with which colonial and revolutionary leaders took ideas, and the deliberateness of their efforts during the Revolution to reshape institutions in their pattern. The more we know about these American provincials the clearer it is that among them were remarkably well-informed students of contemporary social and political theory. There never was a dark age that destroyed the cultural contacts between Europe and America. The sources of transmission had been numerous in the seventeenth century; they increased in the eighteenth. There were not only the impersonal agencies of newspapers, books, and pamphlets, but also continuous personal contact through travel and correspondence. Above all, there were Pan-Atlantic, mainly Anglo-American, interest groups that occasioned a continuous flow of fresh information and ideas between Europe and the mainland

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colonies in America. Of these, the most important were the English dissenters and their numerous codenominationalists in America. Located perforce on the left of the English political spectrum, acutely alive to ideas of reform that might increase their security in England, they were, for the almost endemically nonconformist colonists, a rich source of political and social theory. It was largely through nonconformist connections, as Caroline Robbins' recent book, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (1959) suggests, that the commonwealth radicalism of seventeenth-century England continued to flow to the colonists, blending, ultimately, with other strains of thought to form a common body of advanced theory.

In every colony and in every legislature there were people who knew Locke and Beccaria, Montesquieu and Voltaire; but perhaps more important, there was in every village of every colony someone who knew such transmitters of English nonconformist thought as Watts, Neal, and Burgh; later Priestly and Price—lesser writers, no doubt, but staunch opponents of traditional authority, and they spoke in a familiar idiom. In the bitterly contentious pamphlet literature of mid-eighteenth-century American politics, the most frequently cited authority on matters of principle and theory was not Locke or Montesquieu but *Cato's Letters*, a series of radically libertarian essays written in London in 1720–1723 by two supporters of the dissenting interest, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Through such writers, as well as through the major authors, leading colonists kept contact with a powerful tradition of enlightened thought.

This body of doctrine fell naturally into play in the controversy over the power of the imperial government. For the revolutionary leaders it supplied a common vocabulary and a common pattern of thought, and, when the time came, common principles of political reform. That reform was sought and seriously if unevenly undertaken, there can be no doubt. Institutions were remodeled, laws altered, practices questioned all in accordance with advanced doctrine on the nature of liberty and of the institutions needed to achieve it. The Americans were acutely aware of being innovators, of bringing mankind a long step forward. They believed that they had so far succeeded in their effort to reshape circumstances to conform to enlightened ideas and ideals that they had introduced a new era in human affairs. And they were supported in this by the opinion of in-

formed thinkers in Europe. The contemporary image of the American Revolution at home and abroad was complex; but no one doubted that a revolution that threatened the existing order and portended new social and political arrangements had been made, and made in the name of reason.

Thus, throughout the eighteenth century there were prominent, politically active Americans who were well aware of the development of European thinking, took ideas seriously, and during the Revolution deliberately used them in an effort to reform the institutional basis of society. This much seems obvious. But, paradoxically, and less obviously, it is equally true that many, indeed most, of what these leaders considered to be their greatest achievements during the Revolution—reforms that made America seem to half the world like the veritable heavenly city of the eighteenth-century philosophers—had been matters of fact before they were matters of theory and revolutionary doctrine.

No reform in the entire Revolution appeared of greater importance to Jefferson than the Virginia acts abolishing primogeniture and entail. This action, he later wrote, was part of "a system by which every fibre would be eradicated of antient or future aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican." But primogeniture and entail had never taken deep roots in America, not even in tidewater Virginia. Where land was cheap and easily available such legal restrictions proved to be encumbrances profiting few. Often they tended to threaten rather than secure the survival of the family, as Jefferson himself realized when in 1774 he petitioned the Assembly to break an entail on his wife's estate on the very practical, untheoretical, and common ground that to do so would be "greatly to their [the petitioners'] Interest and that of their Families." The legal abolition of primogeniture and entail during and after the Revolution was of little material consequence. Their demise had been effectively decreed years before by the circumstances of life in a wilderness environment.

Similarly, the disestablishment of religion—a major goal of revolutionary reform—was carried out, to the extent that it was, in circumstances so favorable to it that one wonders not how it was done but why it was not done more thoroughly. There is no more eloquent, moving testimony to revolutionary idealism than the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom: it is the essence of Enlightenment faith. But what did it,

and the disestablishment legislation that had preceded it, reform? What had the establishment of religion meant in pre-revolutionary Virginia? The Church of England was the state church, but dissent was tolerated well beyond the limits of the English Acts of Toleration. The law required nonconformist organizations to be licensed by the government, but dissenters were not barred from their own worship nor penalized for failure to attend the Anglican communion, and they were commonly exempted from parish taxes. Nonconformity excluded no one from voting and only the very few Catholics from enjoying public office. And when the itineracy of revivalist preachers led the establishment to contemplate more restrictive measures, the Baptists and Presbyterians advanced to the point of arguing publicly, and pragmatically, that the toleration they had so far enjoyed was an encumbrance, and that the only proper solution was total liberty: in effect, disestablishment.

Virginia was if anything more conservative than most colonies. The legal establishment of the Church of England was in fact no more rigorous in South Carolina and Georgia: it was considerably weaker in North Carolina. It hardly existed at all in the middle colonies (there was of course no vestige of it in Pennsylvania), and where it did, as in four counties of New York, it was either ignored or had become embattled by violent opposition well before the Revolution. And in Massachusetts and Connecticut, where the establishment, being nonconformist according to English law, was legally tenuous to begin with, tolerance in worship and relief from church taxation had been extended to the major dissenting groups early in the century, resulting well before the Revolution in what was, in effect if not in law, a multiple establishment. And this had been further weakened by the splintering effect of the Great Awakening. Almost everywhere the Church of England, the established church of the highest state authority, was embattled and defensive—driven to rely more and more on its missionary arm, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, to sustain it against the cohorts of dissent.

None of this had resulted from Enlightenment theory. It had been created by the mundane exigencies of the situation: by the distance that separated Americans from ecclesiastical centers in England and the Continent; by the never-ending need to encourage immigration to the colonies; by the variety, the mere numbers, of religious groups, each by itself a minority, forced

to live together; and by the weakness of the coercive powers of the state, its inability to control the social forces within it.

Even more gradual and less contested had been the process by which government in the colonies had become government by the consent of the governed. What has been proved about the franchise in early Massachusetts—that it was open for practically the entire free adult male population—can be proved to a lesser or greater extent for all the colonies. But the extraordinary breadth of the franchise in the American colonies had not resulted from popular demands: there had been no cries for universal manhood suffrage, nor were there popular theories claiming, or even justifying, general participation in politics. Nowhere in eighteenth-century America was there “democracy”—middle-class or otherwise—as we use the term. The main reason for the wide franchise was that the traditional English laws limiting suffrage to freeholders of certain competences proved in the colonies, where freehold property was almost universal, to be not restrictive but widely permissive.

Representation would seem to be different, since before the Revolution complaints had been voiced against the inequity of its apportioning, especially in the Pennsylvania and North Carolina assemblies. But these complaints were based on an assumption that would have seemed natural and reasonable almost nowhere else in the Western world; the assumption that representation in governing assemblages was a proper and rightful attribute of people as such—of regular units of population, or of populated land—rather than the privilege of particular groups, institutions, or regions. Complaints there were, bitter ones. But they were complaints claiming injury and deprivation, not abstract ideals or unfamiliar desires. They assumed from common experience the normalcy of regular and systematic representation. And how should it have been otherwise? The colonial assemblies had not, like ancient parliaments, grown to satisfy a monarch's need for the support of particular groups, or individuals or to protect the interests of a social order, and they had not developed insensibly from precedent to precedent. They had been created at a stroke, and they were in their composition necessarily regular and systematic. Nor did the process, the character, of representation as it was known in the colonies derive from theory. For colonial Americans, representation had none of the symbolic and little of the purely deliberative qualities which, as a result of the revolutionary debates and of

Burke's speeches, would become celebrated as "virtual." To the colonists it was direct and actual: it was, most often, a kind of agency, a delegation of powers, to individuals commonly required to be residents of their constituencies and, often, bound by instructions from them—with the result that eighteenth-century American legislatures frequently resembled, in spirit if not otherwise, those "ancient assemblies" of New York, composed, the contemporary historian William Smith wrote, "of plain, illiterate husbandmen, whose views seldom extended farther than to the regulation of highways, the destruction of wolves, wild cats, and foxes, and the advancement of the other little interests of the particular counties which they were chosen to represent." There was no theoretical basis for such direct and actual representation. It had been created and was continuously reinforced by the pressure of local politics in the colonies and by the political circumstances in England, to which the colonists had found it necessary to send closely instructed, paid representatives—agents, so called—from the very beginning.

But franchise and representation are mere mechanisms of government by consent. At its heart lies freedom from executive power, from the independent action of state authority, and the concentration of power in representative bodies and elected officials. The greatest achievement of the Revolution was of course the repudiation of just such state authority and the transfer of power to popular legislatures. No one will deny that this action was taken in accordance with the highest principles of Enlightenment theory. But the way had been paved by fifty years of grinding factionalism in colonial politics. In the details of prerevolutionary American politics, in the complicated maneuverings of provincial politicians seeking the benefits of government, in the patterns of local patronage and the forms of factional groupings, there lies a history of progressive alienation from the state which resulted, at least by the 1750's, in what Professor Robert Palmer has lucidly described as a revolutionary situation: a condition

. . . in which confidence in the justice or reasonableness of existing authority is undermined, where old loyalties fade, obligations are felt as impositions, law seems arbitrary, and respect for superiors is felt as a form of humiliation; where existing sources of prestige seem undeserved . . . and government is sensed as distant, apart from the governed and not really "representing" them.



Such a situation had developed in mid-eighteenth-century America, not from theories of government or Enlightenment ideas but from the factional opposition that had grown up against a succession of legally powerful, but often cynically self-seeking, inept, and above all politically weak officers of state.

Surrounding all of these circumstances and in various ways controlling them is the fact that that great goal of the European revolutions of the late eighteenth century, equality of status before the law—the abolition of legal privilege—had been reached almost everywhere in the American colonies at least by the early years of the eighteenth century. Analogies between the upper strata of colonial society and the European aristocracies are misleading. Social stratification existed, of course; but the differences between aristocracies in eighteenth-century Europe and in America are more important than the similarities. So far was legal privilege, or even distinction, absent in the colonies that where it existed it was an open sore of festering discontent, leading not merely, as in the case of the Penn family's hereditary claims to tax exemption, to formal protests, but, as in the case of the powers enjoyed by the Hudson River land magnates, to violent opposition as well. More important, the colonial aristocracy, such as it was, had no formal, institutional role in government. No public office or function was legally a prerogative of birth. As there were no social orders in the eyes of the law, so there were no governmental bodies to represent them. The only claim that has been made to the contrary is that, in effect, the governors' Councils constituted political institutions in the service of the aristocracy. But this claim—of dubious value in any case because of the steadily declining political importance of the Councils in the eighteenth century—cannot be substantiated. It is true that certain families tended to dominate the Councils, but they had less legal claim to places in those bodies than certain royal officials who, though hardly members of an American aristocracy, sat on the Councils by virtue of their office. Councilors could be and were removed by simple political maneuver. Council seats were filled either by appointment or election: when appointive, they were vulnerable to political pressure in England; when elective, to the vagaries of public opinion at home. Thus on the one hand it took William Byrd II three years of maneuvering in London to get himself appointed to the seat on the Virginia Council vacated by his father's death in 1704, and on the other, when in 1766 the Hutchinson faction's

control of the Massachusetts Council proved unpopular, it was simply removed wholesale by being voted out of office at the next election. As there were no special privileges, no peculiar group possessions, manners, or attitudes to distinguish councilors from other affluent Americans, so there were no separate political interests expressed in the Councils as such. Councilors joined as directly as others in the factional disputes of the time, associating with groups of all sorts, from minute and transient American opposition parties to massive English-centered political syndicates. A century before the Revolution and not as the result of anti-aristocratic ideas, the colonial aristocracy had become a vaguely defined, fluid group whose power—in no way guaranteed, buttressed, or even recognized in law—was competitively maintained and dependent on continuous, popular support.

Other examples could be given. Were written constitutions felt to be particular guarantees of liberty in enlightened states? Americans had known them in the form of colonial charters and governors' instructions for a century before the Revolution; and after 1763, seeking a basis for their claims against the constitutionality of specific acts of Parliament, they had been driven, out of sheer logical necessity and not out of principle, to generalize that experience. But the point is perhaps clear enough. Major attributes of enlightened politics had developed naturally, spontaneously, early in the history of the American colonies, and they existed as simple matters of social and political fact on the eve of the Revolution.

But if all this is true, what did the Revolution accomplish? Of what real significance were the ideals and ideas? What was the bearing of Enlightenment thought on the political experience of eighteenth-century Americans?

Perhaps this much may be said. What had evolved spontaneously from the demands of place and time was not self-justifying, nor was it universally welcomed. New developments, however gradual, were suspect by some, resisted in part, and confined in their effects. If it was true that the establishment of religion was everywhere weak in the colonies and that in some places it was even difficult to know what was orthodoxy and what was not, it was nevertheless also true that faith in the idea of orthodoxy persisted and with it belief in the propriety of a privileged state religion. If, as a matter of fact, the spread of freehold tenure qualified large populations for voting, it did not

create new reasons for using that power nor make the victims of its use content with what, in terms of the dominant ideal of balance in the state, seemed a disproportionate influence of "the democracy." If many colonists came naturally to assume that representation should be direct and actual, growing with the population and bearing some relation to its distribution, crown officials did not, and they had the weight of precedent and theory as well as of authority with them and hence justification for resistance. If state authority was seen increasingly as alien and hostile and was forced to fight for survival within an abrasive, kaleidoscopic factionalism, the traditional idea nevertheless persisted that the common good was somehow defined by the state and that political parties or factions—organized opposition to established government—were seditious. A traditional aristocracy did not in fact exist; but the assumption that superiority was indivisible, that social eminence and political influence had a natural affinity to each other, did. The colonists instinctively conceded to the claims of the well-born and rich to exercise public office, and in this sense politics remained aristocratic. Behavior had changed—had had to change—with the circumstances of everyday life; but habits of mind and the sense of rightness lagged behind. Many felt the changes to be *away from*, not *toward*, something: that they represented deviance; that they lacked, in a word, legitimacy.

This divergence between habits of mind and belief on the one hand and experience and behavior on the other was ended at the Revolution. A rebellion that destroyed the traditional sources of public authority called forth the full range of advanced ideas. Long-settled attitudes were jolted and loosened. The grounds of legitimacy suddenly shifted. What had happened was seen to have been good and proper, steps in the right direction. The glass was half full, not half empty; and to complete the work of fate and nature, further thought must be taken, theories tested, ideas applied. Precisely because so many social and institutional reforms had already taken place in America, the revolutionary movement there, more than elsewhere, was a matter of doctrine, ideas, and comprehension.

And so it remained. Social change and social conflict of course took place during the revolutionary years; but the essential developments of the period lay elsewhere, in the effort to think through and to apply under the most favorable, permissive, circumstances enlightened ideas of government and society. The

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problems were many, often unexpected and difficult; some were only gradually perceived. Social and personal privilege, for example, could easily be eliminated—it hardly existed; but what of the impersonal privileges of corporate bodies? Legal orders and ranks within society could be outlawed without creating the slightest tremor, and executive power with equal ease subordinated to the legislative: but how was balance within a polity to be achieved? What were the elements to be balanced and how were they to be separated? It was not even necessary formally to abolish the interest of state as a symbol and determinant of the common good; it was simply dissolved: but what was left to keep clashing factions from tearing a government apart? The problems were pressing, and the efforts to solve them mark the stages of revolutionary history.

In behalf of Enlightenment liberalism the revolutionary leaders undertook to complete, formalize, systematize, and symbolize what previously had been only partially realized, confused, and disputed matters of fact. Enlightenment ideas were not instruments of a particular social group, nor did they destroy a social order. They did not create new social and political forces in America. They released those that had long existed, and vastly increased their power. This completion, this rationalization, this symbolization, this lifting into consciousness and endowing with high moral purpose inchoate, confused elements of social and political change—this was the American Revolution.

## 14. *The Abolitionists and Psychology*\*

MARTIN B. DUBERMAN

Out of their heightened concern with the pressing question of Negro rights, a number of historians, especially the younger ones, have begun to take a new look at the abolitionists, men who in their own day were involved in a similar movement of social change. About both them and ourselves we are asking anew such questions as the proper role of agitation, the underlying motives of both reformers and resisters, and the useful limits of outside interference. From this questioning a general tendency has developed to view the abolitionists in a more favorable light than previously. As yet, however, it is a tendency only, and hostility to the abolitionists continues to be strong among historians.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps one reason why no fuller re-evaluation has taken place is that historians have been made cautious by the fate of previous "revisionist" scholarship. We have seen how current preoccupations can prompt dubious historical re-evaluations. But this need not always be the case. Contemporary pressures, if recognized and contained can prove fruitful in stimulating the

\* Reprinted with permission from *The Journal of Negro History*, XLVII (July, 1962), 183-91.

<sup>1</sup> I deliberately refrain from citing specific works and authors. In suggestions as tentative as mine, I have not thought it profitable to take issue with individuals. One point I do wish to make clear is that I am not suggesting *all* historians have viewed the abolitionists without sympathy or understanding. Men such as Louis Filler, Dwight Dumond, Irving Bartlett, Leon Litwack, Ralph Korngold, Louis Ruchames, Oscar Sherwin, and David Davis have, in varying degrees, demonstrated their sympathy. But they have not, in my view, as yet carried the majority of historians along with them.

historical imagination. They may lead us to uncover (not invent) aspects of the past to which we were previously blind.

If historians need more courage in their re-consideration of the abolitionists, they also need more information. Particularly do they need to employ some of the insights and raise some of the questions which developments in related fields of knowledge have made possible. Recent trends in psychology seem especially pertinent, though historians have not attempted to evaluate and incorporate them. It is my hope in this paper to make some beginning in that direction.

It might be well to start by referring to one of psychology's older principles, the uniqueness of personality. Each individual, with his own genetic composition and his own life experience, will develop into a distinctive organism. There are, of course, certain universal processes common to the species—that cluster of basic drives and reflexes which are more or less “instinctive.” There are also a variety of common responses conditioned by our membership in a particular group, be it family, class, church or nation. These similarities among human beings make possible the disciplines—such as sociology, anthropology and social psychology—which concern themselves with patterns of behavior, and demonstrate that no man is *sui generis*. But it does not follow from this that the qualities which are uniquely his are mere irrelevancies. As Gordon Allport has said, “. . . all of the animals in the world are psychologically less distinct from one another than one man is from other men.”<sup>2</sup>

This is not to question, of course, the validity of attempts, whether they be by sociologists, psychologists or historians, to find meaningful similarities in the behavioral patterns of various human groups. The point is to make certain that such similarities genuinely exist, and further, to be aware that in describing them, we do not pretend to be saying *everything* about the individuals involved. Historians, it seems to me, are prone to ignore both cautions—their treatment of the abolitionists being the immediate case in point.

With barely a redeeming hint of uncertainty, many historians list a group of “similar traits” which are said to characterize all abolitionists: “impractical,” “self-righteous,” “fanatical,” “humorless,” “vituperative,” and,—if they are very modern in their terminology—“disturbed.” The list varies, but usually only to

<sup>2</sup> Gordon W. Allport, *Becoming, Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality*, Clinton, 1960, 23.

include adjectives equally hostile and denunciatory. The stereotype of the "abolitionist personality," though fluid in details, is clear enough in its general outlines.

But did most abolitionists really share these personality traits? The fact is, we know much less about the individuals involved in the movement than has been implied. Some of the major figures, such as Joshua Leavitt, have never received biographical treatment; others—the Tappans, Edmund Quincy, and Benjamin Lundy, for example—badly need modern appraisal. And the careers and personalities of the vast majority of significant secondary figures—people like Lydia Maria Child, Sidney Gay, Maria Weston Chapman, Henry B. Stanton, and Abby Kelley Foster—have been almost totally unexplored. Whence comes the confidence, then, that allows historians to talk of "the abolitionist personality," as if this had been microscopically examined and painstakingly reconstructed?

Certainly the evidence which we do have, does not support such confident theorizing. In order to adhere to this conceptual strait-jacket, it is necessary to ignore or discount much that conflicts with it—the modesty of Theodore Weld, the wit of James Russell Lowell, the tender of humanity of Whittier, the worldly charm of Edmund Quincy. This does not mean that we need leap to the opposite extreme and claim all abolitionists were saints and seraphs. But if some of them were disagreeable or disturbed, we want, instead of a blanket indictment, to know which ones and in what ways; we want some recognition of the variety of human beings who entered the movement.

It seems to me that what too many historians have done is to take William Lloyd Garrison as a personality symbol for the entire movement (at the same time, ironically, that they deny him the commanding leadership which he was once assumed to have had). Latching on to some of the undeniably "neurotic" aspects of his personality (and bolstered, it should be said, by the eccentric psychographs of other abolitionists—a Gerrit Smith say, or a Stephen Foster), they equate these with the personality structures of all the abolitionists, and conclude that the movement was composed solely of "quacks." In doing so, they fail to do justice to the wide spectrum of personality involved; in fact, they do not even do justice to Garrison, for to speak exclusively of *his* oracular and abusive qualities is to ignore the considerable evidence of personal warmth and kindliness.

It may be that when we know more of other abolitionists, we

may with equal certainty be able to single out qualities in them which seem palpable symptoms of "disturbance." But let the evidence at least precede the judgment. And let us also show a decent timidity in applying the label "neurotic." Psychiatrists, dealing with a multitude of evidence and bringing to it professional insights, demonstrate more caution in this regard than do untrained historians working with mere traces of personality. If the disposition to be hostile exists, "Neurosis" can almost always be established. Under the Freudian microscope, it would be a rare man indeed whose life showed no evidence of pathological behavior. (Think, for one, of the admirable William James, who, as his devoted biographer, Ralph Barton Perry, has shown, was subject to hypochondria, hallucinations, and intense oscillations of mood.) I am not suggesting that all men's lives, if sufficiently investigated, would show equally severe evidence of disturbance. I mean only to warn that, given the double jeopardy of a hostile commentator and the weight of a hostile historical tradition, we must take special precaution not to be too easily convinced by the "evidence" of neurosis in the abolitionists.

And even were we to establish the neurotic component of behavior, the story would certainly not be complete. To know the pathological elements in an individual's behavior is not to know everything about his behavior. To say that Garrison, in his fantasy world, longed to be punished and thus deliberately courted martyrdom, or that Wendell Phillips, alienated from the "new order," sought to work out his private grievances against the industrial system by indirectly attacking it through slavery, is hardly to exhaust the range of their possible motives. We know far too little about why men do anything—let alone why they do something as specific as joining a reform movement—to assert as confidently as historians have, the motives of whole groups of men. We may never know enough about the human psyche to achieve a comprehensive analysis of motivation; how much greater the difficulty when the subject is dead and we are attempting the analysis on the basis of partial and fragmentary remains.

Our best hope for increased understanding in this area—aside from the artist's tool of intuition—is in the researches of psychology. But at present there is no agreed-upon theory of motivation among psychologists. Allport, however, summarizing current opinion, suggests that behavior does not result solely from the need to reduce tension, but may also aim (especially in a



"healthy" person) at distant goals, the achievement of which can be gained only by maintaining tension.<sup>3</sup> Allport does not press his views, realizing the complexity of the problems at issue. But his hypotheses are at least suggestive as regards the abolitionists, for their motives, rather than being solely the primitive ones of eliminating personal tension (under the guise of ethical commitment), may also have included a healthy willingness to bear tension (in the form of ostracism, personal danger and material sacrifice) in order to persevere in the pursuit of long-range ideals.

Acceptance of these suggestions runs into the massive resistance of neo-Freudian cynicism.<sup>4</sup> How old-fashioned, it will be said, to talk in terms of "ideals" or "conscience," since these are only unconscious rationalizations for "darker" drives which we are unable to face. How old-fashioned, too, to talk as if men could exercise choice in their conduct, since all our behavior is determined by our antecedents.

But the surprising fact is that such views are not old-fashioned. On the contrary, they have recently returned to favor in psycho-analytical circles.<sup>5</sup> Increasing dissatisfaction with the ability of behaviorist theory fully to explain human action, has led to a re-consideration of the role of reason and the possibilities of purposive, deliberate behavior. The result is the influential new school of "ego psychology," which views man as endowed with a considerable margin of freedom and responsibility, and which has restored to the vocabulary such "old-fashioned" terminology as character, willpower and conscience. Moral earnestness, moreover, is no longer equated with self-deception. As Allport has said, the very mark of maturity "seems to be the range and extent of one's feeling of self-involvement in abstract ideals."<sup>6</sup> Some of these new emphases had been prefigured in the work of such philosophers as Sartre, who have long stressed social action as a sign of "authenticity" in man.

But although all of this makes a re-evaluation of the abolitionists possible, it does not make one necessary. Men may now be thought capable of impersonal devotion to ideals, but this does not mean that the abolitionists were such men. Maturity

<sup>3</sup> Allport, *op. cit.*, 65-68.

<sup>4</sup> Based largely on what people think Freud said, rather than what he actually said. See Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*, N. Y., 1959.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, O. Hobart Mowrer, "Psychiatry and Religion," *The Atlantic*, July, 1961.

<sup>6</sup> Allport, *op. cit.*, 45.

may now be defined as the ability to commit ourselves objectively to ethical values, but it does not follow that every man who makes such a commitment does so out of mature motives.

Yet at least some doubts should be raised in our minds as to whether we have been fair in regarding the abolitionists as psychologically homogeneous, and at that, homogeneous in the sense of being self-deceived. My own feeling goes beyond doubt, into conviction. I do not claim, to repeat, that because the abolitionists fought in a noble cause, their motives were necessarily noble—i.e., “pure” and “unselfish,” unrelated in any way to their own inner turmoil or conflicts. A connection between inner problems and outer convictions probably always exists to some degree. But an individual’s public involvement is never completely explained by discussing his private pathology. Yet it is just this that historians have frequently done, and to that degree, they have distorted and devalued the abolitionist commitment.

To provide a concrete example, by way of summary, consider the case of James Russell Lowell, whose biography I am writing, and about whom I can talk with more assurance than I might some other figure.

His history seems to me convincing proof that *some* people at least became abolitionists not primarily to escape from personal problems, but out of real commitment to certain ethical values—recognizing, as I have said, that the two are never wholly unrelated. Lowell’s active life as a reformer came during the period of his greatest contentment—secure in a supremely happy marriage, and confident of his talents and his future. His contemporaries agree in describing him as a gay, witty, warm man, without serious tensions or disabling anxieties. I have come across so little evidence of “pathology” in the Lowell of these years that when the standard picture of the abolitionist as a warped eccentric is applied to him, it becomes absurd.

And he *was* an abolitionist, though various arguments have been used to deny this. Lowell, it has been said, came to the movement late—and only at the instigation of his bride, Maria White, who was a confirmed reformer—he never fully committed himself to it, and he finally left the ranks in the early 1850s. There may be some justice to these charges, but on the whole the argument is not persuasive. Given Lowell’s youth (he was born in 1819) he could not have joined the movement much earlier than he did (which was around 1840), and there is evi-

dence that he was involved in the cause before he met Maria White. The main point is that for roughly ten years he was unquestionably a serious abolitionist, both as an active member of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, and as a frequent contributor to abolitionist periodicals. The reasons for his drifting out of the movement are complex, but turn largely on the fact that his wife's death in 1853 destroyed the structure of his life and left him apathetic to public issues. (Might not this give added weight to the argument that it takes a reasonably contented man to interest himself in the problems of others?)

Even when it is admitted that Lowell was an abolitionist, he is dismissed as not having been a "typical" one. But who was the typical abolitionist? Is the standard of measurement meant to be some outstanding individual—Garrison, say, or Theodore Weld—and is everyone else to be considered more or less of an abolitionist depending on how closely he approximated the personality structure of the model? But a man may be prominent in a movement without necessarily typifying it. And which of several leading—and very different—figures should be chosen as the model? The decision is likely to be arbitrary (even unconscious), varying with each historian.

Or is the standard of measurement meant to be some composite group of traits which accurately describe the large number of abolitionists, so that when any single individual fails to exhibit these traits, he may justifiably be dismissed as "the exception which proves the rule?"<sup>7</sup> This approach is more reasonable, but here again we run up against the old difficulty of drawing a genuinely valid group portrait. We know so little about the individual personalities and careers of the majority of abolitionists that it seems like putting the cart before the horse to even talk about a composite portrait. Certainly the one which is now commonly accepted ("impractical"; "self-righteous," etc.) fails adequately to describe many of the abolitionists about whom we do have information. I mean here not only Lowell, but a number of others. What I have seen in my researches into the papers of people like Edmund Quincy, Lydia Maria Child or Maria Weston Chapman (to name only a few of the more prominent), has created the strong suspicion in my mind that if their personalities were to be investigated in depth, they too

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that in its original form, the aphorism read: "is this the exception which probes the rule?"

would be found to deviate from the accepted portrait in so many significant ways as further to undermine its reliability.

A conceptual scheme may yet be devised which adequately describes the motives and actions of most of the abolitionists. But if so, it will not be of the primitive kind thus far suggested. There is no reason why historians cannot legitimately investigate group patterns, but to do so meaningfully, they must become skilled in the techniques of sociology and other related disciplines. This takes time and inclination, and the historian, busy with his special interests and orientated towards the particular, rarely has either. Unfortunately this does not always prevent him from trying his hand, though the result is frequently the elementary sort of categorizing used to describe the abolitionists.

Opinions will continue to differ as to the best way of achieving desired social change. Our own generation's confrontation with segregation has made this clear. Many of us feel as strongly about the evil of that practice as the abolitionists did about the institution of slavery. Like them, too, we have scant faith in Southern voluntarism or the benevolent workings of time; patience and inactivity have not done their work. Naturally we would like to believe that our sense of urgency comes from concern for the Negro rather than from a need to escape from some private torment of our own. Because of this we are admittedly prone to credit our historical counterpart with equally good motives. Our wish to think well of them may account for our doing so. But as Erich Fromm has said, "the fact that an idea satisfies a wish does not mean necessarily that the idea is false."<sup>8</sup> There is much in the new psychology to encourage the belief that the idea is not false. At any rate, if we are to find out, we need less dogma, more research, and a chastening sense of wonder at the complexities of human nature.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Clinton, 1959, 12.

## 15. *The Roosevelt Reconstruction: Retrospect\**

WILLIAM E. LEUCHTENBURG

In eight years, Roosevelt and the New Dealers had almost revolutionized the agenda of American politics. "Mr. Roosevelt may have given the wrong answers to many of his problems," concluded the editors of *The Economist*. "But he is at least the first President of modern America who has asked the right questions." In 1932, men of acumen were absorbed to an astonishing degree with such questions as prohibition, war debts, and law enforcement. By 1936, they were debating social security, the Wagner Act, valley authorities, and public housing. The thirties witnessed a rebirth of issues politics, and parties split more sharply on ideological lines than they had in many years past. "I incline to think that for years up to the present juncture thinking Democrats and thinking Republicans had been divided by an imaginary line," reflected a Massachusetts congressman in 1934. "Now for the first time since the period before the Civil War we find vital principles at stake. Much of this change resulted simply from the depression trauma, but much too came from the force of Roosevelt's personality and his use of his office as both pulpit and lectern. "Of course you have fallen into some errors—that is human," former Supreme Court Justice John Clarke wrote the President, "but you have put a new face upon the social and political life of our country."<sup>1</sup>

\* Reprinted by permission from *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York, Harper & Row, 1963), 326-48.

<sup>1</sup> The Editors of the *Economist*, *The New Deal* (New York, 1937), p. 149; Representative Robert Luce to Herbert Claiborne Pell, November 14, 1934, Pell MSS., Box 7; Elliott Roosevelt (ed.), *F.D.R.: His Personal Letters, 1928-1945* (2 vols., New York, 1950), I, 723.

Franklin Roosevelt re-created the modern Presidency. He took an office which had lost much of its prestige and power in the previous twelve years and gave it an importance which went well beyond what even Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had done. Clinton Rossiter has observed: "Only Washington, who made the office, and Jackson, who remade it, did more than [Roosevelt] to raise it to its present condition of strength, dignity, and independence."<sup>2</sup> Under Roosevelt, the White House became the focus of all government—the fountainhead of ideas, the initiator of action, the representative of the national interest.

Roosevelt greatly expanded the President's legislative functions. In the nineteenth century, Congress had been jealous of its prerogatives as the lawmaking body, and resented any encroachment on its domain by the Chief Executive. Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt had broken new ground in sending actual drafts of bills to Congress and in using devices like the caucus to win enactment of measures they favored. Franklin Roosevelt made such constant use of these tools that he came to assume a legislative role not unlike that of a prime minister. He sent special messages to Congress, accompanied them with drafts of legislation prepared by his assistants, wrote letters to committee chairmen or members of Congress to urge passage of the proposals, and authorized men like Corcoran to lobby as presidential spokesmen on the Hill. By the end of Roosevelt's tenure in the White House, Congress looked automatically to the Executive for guidance; it expected the administration to have a "program" to present for consideration.<sup>3</sup>

Roosevelt's most important formal contribution was his creation of the Executive Office of the President on September 8, 1939. Executive Order 8248, a "nearly unnoticed but none the less epoch-making event in the history of American institutions," set up an Executive Office staffed with six administrative assistants with a "passion for anonymity."<sup>4</sup> In 1939, the President not only placed obvious agencies like the White House Office in

<sup>2</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (Signet edition, New York, 1956), p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-84; Edward S. Corwin, *The President: Office and Powers 1787-1957* (New York, 1957), pp. 274-275. Yet despite the growth of the Presidency, this was a period in which Congress had great influence. Much of the specific New Deal legislation was the consequence of the work of a Robert Wagner or a Robert La Follette, Jr. The expansion of the Presidency resulted in a reinvigoration of the whole political system.

<sup>4</sup> Luther Gulick, cited in Rossiter, *American Presidency*, p. 96.

the Executive Office but made the crucial decision to shift the Bureau of the Budget from the Treasury and put it under his wing. In later years, such pivotal agencies as the Council of Economic Advisers, the National Security Council, and the Central Intelligence Agency would be moved into the Executive Office of the President. Roosevelt's decision, Rossiter has concluded, "converts the Presidency into an instrument of twentieth-century government; it gives the incumbent a sporting chance to stand the strain and fulfill his constitutional mandate as a one-man branch of our three-part government; it deflates even the most forceful arguments, which are still raised occasionally, for a plural executive; it assures us that the Presidency will survive the advent of the positive state. Executive Order 8248 may yet be judged to have saved the Presidency from paralysis and the Constitution from radical amendment."<sup>5</sup>

Roosevelt's friends have been too quick to concede that he was a poor administrator. To be sure, he found it difficult to discharge incompetent aides, he procrastinated about decisions, and he ignored all the canons of sound administration by giving men overlapping assignments and creating a myriad of agencies which had no clear relation to the regular departments of government.<sup>6</sup> But if the test of good administration is not an impeccable organizational chart but creativity, then Roosevelt must be set down not merely as a good administrator but as a resourceful innovator. The new agencies he set up gave a spirit of excitement to Washington that the routinized old-line departments could never have achieved. The President's refusal to proceed through channels, however vexing at times to his subordinates, resulted in a competition not only among men but among ideas, and encouraged men to feel that their own beliefs might win the day. "You would be surprised, Colonel, the remarkable ideas that have been turned loose just because men have felt that they can get a hearing," one senator confided.<sup>7</sup> The President's "procrastination" was his own way both of arriving at a sense of national consensus and of reaching a decision by observing a

<sup>5</sup> Rossiter, *American Presidency*, p. 100. Cf. Emile Giraud, *La Crise de la démocratie et le renforcement du pouvoir exécutif* (Paris, 1938).

<sup>6</sup> "At times Roosevelt acted as if a new agency were almost a new solution. His addiction to new organizations became a kind of nervous tic which disturbed even avid New Dealers." Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1959), p. 535. Schlesinger has an excellent discussion of Roosevelt's administrative talent.

<sup>7</sup> Elbert Thomas to Colonel E. LeRoy Bourne, January 6, 1934, Elbert Thomas MSS., Box 23.

trial by combat among rival theories. Periods of indecision—as in the spring of 1935 or the beginning of 1938—were inevitably followed by a fresh outburst of new proposals.<sup>8</sup>

Most of all, Roosevelt was a successful administrator because he attracted to Washington thousands of devoted and highly skilled men. Men who had been fighting for years for lost causes were given a chance: John Collier, whom the President courageously named Indian Commissioner; Arthur Powell Davis, who had been ousted as chief engineer of the Department of the Interior at the demand of power interests; old conservationists like Harry Slaterry, who had fought the naval oil interests in the Harding era. When Harold Ickes took office as Secretary of the Interior, he looked up Louis Glavis—he did not even know whether the “martyr” of the Ballinger-Pinchot affair was still alive—and appointed him to his staff.<sup>9</sup>

The New Dealers displayed striking ingenuity in meeting problems of governing. They coaxed salmon to climb ladders at Bonneville; they sponsored a Young Choreographers Laboratory in the WPA's Dance Theatre; they gave the pioneer documentary film maker Pare Lorentz the opportunity to create his classic films *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River*. At the Composers Forum-Laboratory of the Federal Music Project, William Schuman received his first serious hearing. In Arizona, Father Berard Haile of St. Michael's Mission taught written Navajo to the Indians.<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt, in the face of derision from professional foresters and prairie states' governors, persisted in a bold scheme to plant a mammoth “shelterbelt” of parallel rows of trees from the Dakotas to the Panhandle. In all, more than two hundred million trees were planted—cottonwood and willow, hackberry and cedar, Russian olive and Osage orange; within six years, the President's visionary windbreak had won over his former critics.<sup>11</sup> The spirit behind such innovations

<sup>8</sup> Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York, 1960), pp. 156–158.

<sup>9</sup> In Roosevelt's first year in office, he signed an order restoring Glavis to the civil service status he had lost when President Taft fired him. Ironically, Ickes found Glavis as intolerable a subordinate as Taft had, and concluded that he had “been very unjust to Ballinger all of these years.” *The Secret Diary of Harold Ickes* (3 vols., New York, 1954), III, 111.

<sup>10</sup> John Collier to Louis Brandeis, April 5, 1937, Brandeis MSS., SC 19.

<sup>11</sup> H. H. Chapman, “Digest of Opinions Received on the Shelterbelt Project,” *Journal of Forestry*, XXXII (1934), 952–957; Bristow Adams, “Some Fence!” *Cornell Countryman*, XXXII (1934), 4; *Science News Letter*, CXXXIV (1938), 409; “Prairie Tree Banks,” *American Forester*, CXLVII (1941), 177.



generated a new excitement about the potentialities of government. "Once again," Roosevelt told a group of young Democrats in April, 1936, "the very air of America is exhilarating."<sup>12</sup>

Roosevelt dominated the front pages of the newspapers as no other President before or since has done. "Frank Roosevelt and the NRA have taken the place of love nests," commented Joe Patterson, publisher of the tabloid *New York Daily News*. At his very first press conference, Roosevelt abolished the written question and told reporters they could interrogate him without warning. Skeptics predicted the free and easy exchange would soon be abandoned, but twice a week, year in and year out, he threw open the White House doors to as many as two hundred reporters, most of them representing hostile publishers, who would crowd right up to the President's desk to fire their questions. The President joshed them, traded wisecracks with them, called them by their first names; he charmed them by his good-humored ease and impressed them with his knowledge of detail.<sup>13</sup> To a degree, Roosevelt's press conference introduced, as some observers claimed, a new institution like Britain's parliamentary questioning; more to the point, it was a device the President manipulated, disarmingly and adroitly, to win support for his program.<sup>14</sup> It served too as a classroom to instruct the country in the new economics and the new politics.

Roosevelt was the first president to master the technique of reaching people directly over the radio. In his fireside chats, he talked like a father discussing public affairs with his family in the living room. As he spoke, he seemed unconscious of the fact that he was addressing millions. "His head would nod and his hands would move in simple, natural, comfortable gestures," Frances Perkins recalled. "His face would smile and light up as though he were actually sitting on the front porch or in the parlor with them." Eleanor Roosevelt later observed that after the President's death people would stop her on the street to say

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Rosenman (ed.), *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (13 vols., New York, 1938-50), V, 165.

<sup>13</sup> Elmer Cornwell, Jr., "Presidential News: The Expanding Public Image," *Journalism Quarterly*, XXXVI (1959), 275-283; "The Chicago Tribune," *Fortune*, IX (May, 1934), 108; *Editor and Publisher*, March 4, 1933; Thomas Stokes, *Chip Off My Shoulder* (Princeton, 1940), p. 367.

<sup>14</sup> Erwin Canham, "Democracy's Fifth Wheel," *Literary Digest*, CXIX (January 5, 1935), 6; Douglass Cater, *The Fourth Branch of Government* (Boston, 1959), pp. 13-14, 142-155; James Pollard, *The Presidents and the Press* (New York, 1947), pp. 773-845.

"they missed the way the President used to talk to them. They'd say 'He used to talk to me about my government.' There was a real dialogue between Franklin and the people," she reflected. "That dialogue seems to have disappeared from the government since he died."<sup>15</sup>

For the first time for many Americans, the federal government became an institution that was directly experienced. More than state and local government, it came to be *the* government, an agency directly concerned with their welfare. It was the source of their relief payments; it taxed them directly for old age pensions; it even gave their children hot lunches in school. As the role of the state changed from that of neutral arbiter to a "powerful promoter of society's welfare," people felt an interest in affairs in Washington they had never had before.<sup>16</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt personified the state as protector. It became commonplace to say that people felt toward the President the kind of trust they would normally express for a warm and understanding father who comforted them in their grief or safeguarded them from harm. An insurance man reported: "My mother looks upon the President as someone so immediately concerned with her problems and difficulties that she would not be greatly surprised were he to come to her house some evening and stay to dinner." From his first hours in office, Roosevelt gave people the feeling that they could confide in him directly. As late as the Presidency of Herbert Hoover, one man, Ira Smith, had sufficed to take care of all the mail the White House received. Under Roosevelt, Smith had to acquire a staff of fifty people to handle the thousands of letters written to the President each week. Roosevelt gave people a sense of membership in the national community. Justice Douglas has written: "He was in a very special sense the people's President, because he made them feel that with him in the White House they shared the Presidency. The sense of sharing the Presidency gave even the most humble citizen a lively sense of belonging."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York, 1946), p. 72; Bernard Asbell, *When F. D. R. Died* (New York, 1961), p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> Felix Frankfurter, "The Young Men Go to Washington," *Fortune*, XIII (1936), 61; E. W. Bakke, *Citizens Without Work* (New Haven, 1940), pp. 52-53.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Neuberger, "They Love Roosevelt," *Forum and Century*, CI (1939), 15; Corwin, *The President*, p. 471; William O. Douglas, *Being an American* (New York, 1948), p. 88.

When Roosevelt took office, the country, to a very large degree, responded to the will of a single element: the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant property-holding class. Under the New Deal, new groups took their place in the sun. It was not merely that they received benefits they had not had before but that they were "recognized" as having a place in the commonwealth. At the beginning of the Roosevelt era, charity organizations ignored labor when seeking "community" representation; at the end of the period, no fund-raising committee was complete without a union representative. While Theodore Roosevelt had founded a lily-white Progressive party in the South and Woodrow Wilson had introduced segregation into the federal government, Franklin Roosevelt had quietly brought the Negro into the New Deal coalition. When the distinguished Negro contralto Marian Anderson was denied a concert hall in Washington, Secretary Ickes arranged for her to perform from the steps of Lincoln Memorial. Equal representation for religious groups became so well accepted that, as one priest wryly complained, one never saw a picture of a priest in a newspaper unless he was flanked on either side by a minister and a rabbi.

The devotion Roosevelt aroused owed much to the fact that the New Deal assumed the responsibility for guaranteeing every American a minimum standard of subsistence. Its relief programs represented an advance over the barbaric predepression practices that constituted a difference not in degree but in kind. One analyst wrote: "During the ten years between 1929 and 1939 more progress was made in public welfare and relief than in the three hundred years after this country was first settled." The Roosevelt administration gave such assistance not as a matter of charity but of right. This system of social rights was written into the Social Security Act. Other New Deal legislation abolished child labor in interstate commerce and, by putting a floor under wages and a ceiling on hours, all but wiped out the sweatshop.<sup>18</sup>

Roosevelt and his aides fashioned a government which consciously sought to make the industrial system more humane and to protect workers and their families from exploitation. In his acceptance speech in June, 1936, the President stated: "Governments can err, Presidents do make mistakes, but the immortal

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<sup>18</sup> Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief 1929-1939* (New York, 1940), p. ix; Thomas Paul Jenkin, *Reactions of Major Groups to Positive Government in the United States, 1930-1940* (University of California Publications in Political Science [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945], p. 284.

Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted in different scales.

"Better the occasional faults of a Government that lives in a spirit of charity than the constant omission of a Government frozen in the ice of its own indifference." Nearly everyone in the Roosevelt government was caught up to some degree by a sense of participation in something larger than themselves. A few days after he took office, one of the more conservative New Deal administrators wrote in his diary: "This should be a Gov't of humanity."<sup>19</sup>

The federal government expanded enormously in the Roosevelt years. The crisis of the depression dissipated the distrust of the state inherited from the eighteenth century and reinforced in diverse ways by the Jeffersonians and the Spencerians. Roosevelt himself believed that liberty in America was imperiled more by the agglomerations of private business than by the state. The New Dealers were convinced that the depression was the result not simply of an economic breakdown but of a political collapse; hence, they sought new political instrumentalities. The reformers of the 1930's accepted almost unquestioningly the use of coercion by the state to achieve reforms.<sup>20</sup> Even Republicans who protested that Roosevelt's policies were snuffing our liberty voted overwhelmingly in favor of coercive measures.<sup>21</sup>

This elephantine growth of the federal government owed much to the fact that local and state governments had been tried in the crisis and found wanting. When one magazine wired state governors to ask their views, only one of the thirty-seven who replied announced that he was willing to have the states resume responsibility for relief.<sup>22</sup> Every time there was a rumored cutback of federal spending for relief, Washington was besieged by delegations of mayors protesting that city governments did not have the resources to meet the needs of the unemployed.

<sup>19</sup> *Public Papers*, V, 235; J. F. T. O'Connor MS. Diary, June 25, 1933.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Carter has noted the change in the social gospel. The editors of *The Baptist*, he has written, "recognized that the transfer of social privilege involves the use of social coercion, a fact which the Right and Center of the old Social Gospel had not always faced up to." Carter, "The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1954).

<sup>21</sup> On the compulsory Potato Act, only six Republicans (and just nine Democrats) voted in opposition.

<sup>22</sup> *Today*, III (January 12, 1935), 4.

Even more dramatic was the impotence of local governments in dealing with crime, a subject that captured the national imagination in a decade of kidnappings and bank holdups. In September, 1933, the notorious bank robber John Dillinger was arrested in Ohio. Three days later, his confederates released him from jail and killed the Lima, Ohio, sheriff. In January, 1934, after bank holdups at Racine, Wisconsin, and East Chicago, Indiana, Dillinger was apprehended in Tucson, Arizona, and returned to the "escape-proof" jail of Crown Point, Indiana, reputedly the strongest county prison in the country. Within two days he had bluffed his way out with a wooden gun he had whittled and had driven off in the sheriff's car. While five thousand law officers pursued him, he stopped for a haircut in a barber shop, bought cars, and had a home-cooked Sunday dinner with his family in his home town. When he needed more arms, he raided the police station at Warsaw, Indiana.

Dillinger's exploits touched off a national outcry for federal action. State and local authorities could not cope with gangs which crossed and recrossed jurisdictional lines, which were equipped with Thompson submachine guns and high-powered cars, and which had a regional network of informers and fences in the Mississippi Valley. Detection and punishment of crime had always been a local function; now there seemed no choice but to call in the federal operatives. In July, 1934, federal agents shot down Dillinger outside a Chicago theater. In October, FBI men killed Pretty Boy Floyd near East Liverpool, Ohio; in November, they shot Baby Face Nelson, Public Enemy No. 1, near Niles Center, Illinois. By the end of 1934, the nation had a new kind of hero: the G-man Melvin Purvis and the chief of the Division of Investigation of the Department of Justice, J. Edgar Hoover. By the end of that year, too, Congress had stipulated that a long list of crimes would henceforth be regarded as federal offenses, including not only kidnapping but holding up a bank insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. The family of a kidnaped victim could call in the federal police simply by phoning National 7117 in Washington.<sup>23</sup>

Under the New Deal, the federal government greatly extended its power over the economy. By the end of the Roosevelt years,

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<sup>23</sup> "The Marines Are Coming," *Fortune*, X (August, 1934), 56 ff.; *Literary Digest*, CXVII (May 5, 1934), 9; CXVIII (July 28, 1934), 6; CXVIII (December 8, 1934), 7; *Time*, XXIII (March 12, 1934), 14; *Public Papers*, III, 242 ff.

few questioned the right of the government to pay the farmer millions in subsidies not to grow crops, to enter plants to conduct union elections, to regulate business enterprises from utility companies to air lines, or even to compete directly with business by generating and distributing hydroelectric power. All of these powers had been ratified by the Supreme Court, which had even held that a man growing grain solely for his own use was affecting interstate commerce and hence subject to federal penalties.<sup>24</sup> The President, too, was well on his way to becoming "the chief economic engineer," although this was not finally established until the Full Employment Act of 1946. In 1931, Hoover had hooted that some people thought "that by some legerdemain we can legislate ourselves out of a world-wide depression." In the Roosevelt era, the conviction that government both should and could act to forestall future breakdowns gained general acceptance. The New Deal left a large legacy of anti-depression controls—securities regulation, banking reforms, unemployment compensation—even if it could not guarantee that a subsequent administration would use them.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1930's, the financial center of the nation shifted from Wall Street to Washington. In May, 1934, a writer reported: "Financial news no longer originates in Wall Street." That same month, *Fortune* commented on a revolution in the credit system which was "one of the major historical events of the generation." "Mr. Roosevelt," it noted, "seized the Federal Reserve without firing a shot." The federal government had not only broken down the old separation of bank and state in the Reserve system but had gone into the credit business itself in a wholesale fashion under the aegis of the RFC, the Farm Credit Administration, and the housing agencies. Legislation in 1933 and 1934 had established federal regulation of Wall Street for the first time. No longer could the New York Stock Exchange operate as a private club free of national supervision. In 1935, Congress leveled the mammoth holding-company pyramids and centralized yet more authority over the banking system in the federal government. After a tour of the United States in 1935, Sir Josiah

<sup>24</sup> *Wickard v. Filburn*, 317 U.S. 111 (1942).

<sup>25</sup> Sidney Hyman, *The American President* (New York, 1954), pp. 263-264; Carl Degler, *Out of Our Past* (New York, 1959), pp. 391-393. In a few pages, Degler has written the best analysis of the permanent significance of the New Deal.

Stamp wrote: "Just as in 1929 the whole country was 'Wall Street-conscious' now it is 'Washington-conscious.'" <sup>26</sup>

Despite this encroachment of government on traditional business prerogatives, the New Deal could advance impressive claims to being regarded as a "savior of capitalism." Roosevelt's sense of the land, of family, and of the community marked him as a man with deeply ingrained conservative traits. In the New Deal years, the government sought deliberately, in Roosevelt's words, "to energize private enterprise." The RFC financed business, housing agencies underwrote home financing, and public works spending aimed to revive the construction industry. Moreover, some of the New Deal reforms were Janus-faced. The NYA, in aiding jobless youth, also served as a safety valve to keep young people out of the labor market. A New Deal congressman, in pushing for public power projects, argued that the country should take advantage of the sea of "cheap labor" on the relief rolls. Even the Wagner Act and the movement for industrial unionism were motivated in part by the desire to contain "unbalanced and radical" labor groups. Yet such considerations should not obscure the more important point: that the New Deal, however conservative it was in some respects and however much it owed to the past, marked a radically new departure. As Carl Degler writes: "The conclusion seems inescapable that, traditional as the words may have been in which the New Deal expressed itself, in actuality it was a revolutionary response to a revolutionary situation." <sup>27</sup>

Not all of the changes that were wrought were the result of Roosevelt's own actions or of those of his government. Much of the force for change came from progressives in Congress, or from nongovernmental groups like the C.I.O., or simply from the

<sup>26</sup> Ferdinand Lundberg, "Wall Street Dances to Washington's Tune," *Literary Digest*, CXVII (May 12, 1934), 46; "Federal Reserve," *Fortune*, IX (May, 1934), 65-66, 125; Sir Josiah Stamp, "Six Weeks in America," *The Times* (London), July 4, 1935.

<sup>27</sup> *Public Papers*, IX, 11; Walter Pierce to Bureau of Publicity, Democratic National Committee, January 4, 1940, Pierce MSS., File 7.1; Robert Wagner to Harold McCollom, April 24, 1935, Wagner MSS.; Sidney Lens, *Left, Right & Center* (Hinsdale, Ill., 1949), pp. 286 ff.; Degler *Out of Our Past*, p. 416. Not only did the New Deal borrow many ideas and institutions from the Progressive era, but the New Dealers and the progressives shared more postulates and values than is commonly supposed. Nonetheless, the spirit of the 1930's seems to me to be quite different from that of the Progressive era.

impersonal agency of the depression itself. Yet, however much significance one assigns the "objective situation," it is difficult to gainsay the importance of Roosevelt. If, in Miami in February, 1933, an assassin's bullet had been true to its mark and John Garner rather than Roosevelt had entered the White House the next month, or if the Roosevelt lines had cracked at the Democratic convention in 1932 and Newton Baker had been the compromise choice, the history of America in the thirties would have been markedly different.

At a time when democracy was under attack elsewhere in the world, the achievements of the New Deal were especially significant. At the end of 1933, in an open letter to President Roosevelt, John Maynard Keynes had written: "You have made yourself the trustee for those in every country who seek to mend the evils of our condition by reasoned experiment within the framework of the existing social system. If you fail, rational change will be gravely prejudiced throughout the world, leaving orthodoxy and revolution to fight it out." In the next few years, teams of foreigners toured the TVA, Russians and Arabs came to study the shelterbelt, French writers taxed Léon Blum with importing "Rooseveltism" to France, and analysts characterized Paul Van Zeeland's program in Belgium as a "New Deal." Under Roosevelt, observed a Montevideo newspaper, the United States had become "as it was in the eighteenth century, the victorious emblem around which may rally the multitudes thirsting for social justice and human fraternity."<sup>28</sup>

In their approach to reform, the New Dealers reflected the tough-minded, hard-boiled attitude that permeated much of America in the thirties. In 1931, the gangster film *Public Enemy* had given the country a new kind of hero in James Cagney: the aggressive, unsentimental tough guy who deliberately assaulted the romantic tradition. It was a type whose role in society could easily be manipulated; gangster hero Cagney of the early thirties was transformed into G-man hero Cagney of the later thirties. Even more representative was Humphrey Bogart, creator of the "private eye" hero, the man of action who masks his feelings in

<sup>28</sup> *The New York Times*, December 31, 1933; Ludovic Naudeau, "Le Rooseveltisme ou la troisième solution," *L'Illustration*, XCCV (November 28, 1936), 375; Otto Veit, "Franklin Roosevelt's Experiment," *Die Neue Rundschau*, XLV (1934), 718-734; Nicholas Halasz, *Roosevelt Through Foreign Eyes* (Princeton, 1961); Donald Dozer, *Are We Good Neighbors?* (Gainesville, 1959), p. 30.



a calculated emotional neutrality.<sup>29</sup> Bogart, who began as the cold desperado Duke Matee of *Petrified Forest* and the frightening Black Legionnaire, soon turned up on the right side of anti-Fascist causes, although he never surrendered the pose of non-involvement. This fear of open emotional commitment and this admiration of toughness ran through the vogue of the "Dead End Kids," films like *Nothing Sacred*, the popularity of the St. Louis Cardinals' spike-flying Gas House Gang, and the "hard-boiled" fiction of writers like James Cain and Dashiell Hammett.

Unlike the earlier Progressive, the New Dealer shied away from being thought of as sentimental.<sup>30</sup> Instead of justifying relief as a humanitarian measure, the New Dealers often insisted it was necessary to stimulate purchasing power or to stabilize the economy or to "conserve manpower." The justification for a better distribution of income was neither "social justice" nor a "healthier national life," wrote Adolf Berle. "It remained for the hard-boiled student to work out the simple equation that unless the national income was pretty widely diffused there were not enough customers to keep the plants going."<sup>31</sup> The reformers of the thirties abandoned—or claimed they had abandoned—the old Emersonian hope of reforming man and sought only to change institutions.<sup>32</sup> This meant that they did not seek to "uplift" the people they were helping but only to improve their economic position. "In other words," Tugwell stated bluntly, "the New Deal is attempting to do nothing to *people*, and does not seek at all to alter their way of life, their wants and desires."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York, 1939), pp. 509-512; Lincoln Kirstein, "James Cagney and the American Hero," *Hound and Horn*, V (1932), 465-467; Alistair Cooke, *A Generation on Trial* (New York, 1950), p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> A New Deal social worker, obviously moved by something she had seen, would preface her report apologetically: "At the risk of seeming slobbery . . ." Martha Cellhorn to Harry Hopkins, April 25, 1935, Hopkins MSS.

<sup>31</sup> A. A. Berle, Jr., "The Social Economics of the New Deal," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 29, 1933, pp. 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Edgar Kemler, *The Deflation of American Ideals* (Washington, 1941), p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> Tugwell, *The Battle for Democracy* (New York, 1935), p. 319. "The excuse for us being in this thing," Aubrey Williams explained to NYA leaders, "is that we are trying to reform the structure of things rather than try to reform the people." National Advisory Committee, NYA, Minutes, August 15, 1937, Charles Taussig MSS., Box 6. In a speech to TVA employees, David Lilienthal derided "uplift." George Fort Milton to Lilienthal, July 10, 1936, Milton MSS., Box 20.

Reform in the 1930's meant *economic* reform; it departed from the Methodist-parsonage morality of many of the earlier Progressives, in part because much of the New Deal support, and many of its leaders, derived from urban immigrant groups hostile to the old Sabbatarianism. While the progressive grieved over the fate of the prostitute, the New Dealer would have placed Mrs. Warren's profession under a code authority. If the archetypical progressive was Jane Addams singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers," the representative New Dealer was Harry Hopkins betting on the horses at Laurel Race Track. When directing FERA in late 1933, Hopkins announced: "I would like to provide orchestras for beer gardens to encourage people to sit around drinking their beer and enjoying themselves. It would be a great unemployment relief measure." "I feel no call to remedy evils," Raymond Moley declared. "I have not the slightest urge to be a reformer. Social workers make me very weary. They have no sense of humor."<sup>34</sup>

Despite Moley's disclaimer, many of the early New Dealers like himself and Adolf Berle did, in fact, hope to achieve reform through regeneration: the regeneration of the businessman. By the end of 1935, the New Dealers were pursuing a quite different course. Instead of attempting to evangelize the Right, they mobilized massive political power against the power of the corporation. They relied not on converting industrial sinners but in using sufficient coercion. New Dealers like Thurman Arnold sought to ignore "moral" considerations altogether; Arnold wished not to punish wrongdoers but to achieve price flexibility. His "faith" lay in the expectation that "fanatical alignments between opposing political principles may disappear and a competent, practical, opportunistic governing class may rise to power."<sup>35</sup> With such expectations, the New Dealers frequently had little patience with legal restraints that impeded action. "I want to assure you," Hopkins told the NYA Advisory Committee, "that we are not afraid of exploring anything within the law, and we have a lawyer who will declare anything you want to do legal."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Time*, XXIII (January 1, 1934), 10; XXI (May 8, 1933), 10. Cf. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955), pp. 300-322.

<sup>35</sup> Arnold, *Symbols of Government*, pp. 270-271. Cf. Sidney Hook, *Reason, Social Myths and Democracy* (New York, 1940), pp. 41-61.

<sup>36</sup> National Advisory Committee, NYA, Minutes, August 15, 1935, Charles Taussig MSS., Box 6.

In the thirties, nineteenth-century individualism gave ground to a new emphasis on social security and collective action.<sup>37</sup> In the twenties, America hailed Lindbergh as the Lone Eagle; in the thirties, when word arrived that Amelia Earhart was lost at sea, the *New Republic* asked the government to prohibit citizens from engaging in such "useless" exploits. The NRA sought to drive newsboys off the streets and took a Blue Eagle away from a company in Huck Finn's old town of Hannibal, Missouri, because a fifteen-year-old was found driving a truck for his father's business. Josef Hofmann urged that fewer musicians become soloists, Hollywood stars like Joan Crawford joined the Screen Actors Guild, and Leopold Stokowski canceled a performance in Pittsburgh because theatre proprietors were violating a union contract.<sup>38</sup> In New York in 1933, after a series of meetings in Heywood Broun's penthouse apartment, newspapermen organized the American Newspaper Guild in rebellion against the disspiriting romanticism of Richard Harding Davis.<sup>39</sup> "We no longer care to develop the individual as a unique contributor to a democratic form," wrote the mordant Edgar Kemler. "In this movement each individual sub-man is important, not for his uniqueness, but for his ability to lose himself in the mass, through his fidelity to the trade union, or cooperative organization, or political party."<sup>40</sup>

The liberals of the thirties admired intellectual activity which had a direct relation to concrete reality. Stuart Chase wrote of one government report: "This book is live stuff—wheelbarrow, cement mixer, steam dredge, generator, combine, power-line stuff; library dust does not gather here."<sup>41</sup> If the poet did not wish to risk the suspicion that his loyalties were not to the historic necessities of his generation, wrote Archibald MacLeish, he must "soak himself not in books" but in the physical reality

<sup>37</sup> In Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, Harry Morgan says: "No matter how a man alone ain't got no bloody . . . chance." Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not* (New York, 1937), p. 225.

<sup>38</sup> *New Republic*, XCI (1937), 262; *Time*, XXIII (February 19, 1934), 14; Herbert Harris, *American Labor* (New Haven, 1938), p. 175.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Editor and Publisher*, LXVI (December 23, 1933), 7, 28.

<sup>40</sup> Kemler, *Deflation of Ideals*, pp. 109-110. Kemler, it hardly need be said, grossly overstated his argument.

<sup>41</sup> Stuart Chase, "Old Man River," *New Republic*, LXXXII (1935), 175. "I speak in dispraise of dusty learning, and in disparagement of the historical technique," declared Tugwell. "Are our plans wrong? Who knows? Can we tell from reading history? Hardly." Tugwell, *Battle for Democracy*, pp. 70-71.

of "by what organization of men and railroads and trucks and belts and book-entries the materials of a single automobile are assembled." <sup>42</sup> The New Dealers were fascinated by "the total man days per year for timber stand improvement," and Tugwell rejoiced in the "practical success" of the Resettlement Administration demonstrated by "these healthy collection figures." Under the Special Skills Division of the RA, Greenbelt was presented with inspirational paintings like *Constructing Sewers*, *Concrete Mixer*, and *Shovel at Work*. On one occasion, in attempting to mediate a literary controversy, the critic Edmund Wilson wrote: "It should be possible to convince Marxist critics of the importance of a work like 'Ulysses' by telling them that it is a great piece of engineering—as it is." <sup>43</sup> In this activist world of the New Dealers, the aesthete and the man who pursued a life of contemplation, especially the man whose interests centered in the past were viewed with scorn. In Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest*, Alan Squier, the ineffectual aesthete, meets his death in the desert and is buried in the petrified forest where the living turn to stone. He is an archaic type for whom the world has no place.

The new activism explicitly recognized its debt to Dewey's dictum of "learning by doing" and, like other of Dewey's ideas, was subject to exaggeration and perversion. The New Deal, which gave unprecedented authority to intellectuals in government, was, in certain important respects, anti-intellectual. Without the activist faith, perhaps not nearly so much would have been achieved. It was Lilienthal's conviction that "there is almost nothing, however fantastic, that (given competent organization) a team of engineers, scientists, and administrators cannot do today" that helped make possible the successes of TVA. <sup>44</sup> Yet the liberal activists grasped only a part of the truth; they retreated from conceptions like "tragedy," "sin," "God," often had small patience with the force of tradition, and showed little understanding of what moved men to seek meanings outside of political experience. As sensitive a critic as the poet Horace

<sup>42</sup> MacLeish, *A Time to Speak* (Boston, 1941), p. 45. Cf. MacLeish, "The Social Cant," *New Republic*, LXXIII (1932), 156-158.

<sup>43</sup> *The New York Times*, October 29, 1936; Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World* (Ithaca, 1959), p. 196; Edmund Wilson, "The Literary Class War: I," *New Republic*, LXX (1932), 323.

<sup>44</sup> David Lilienthal, *TVA: Democracy on the March* (New York, 1944), p. 3.

Gregory could write, in a review of the works of D. H. Lawrence: "The world is moving away from Lawrence's need for personal salvation; his 'dark religion' is not a substitute for economic planning."<sup>45</sup> This was not the mood of all men in the thirties—not of a William Faulkner, an Ellen Glasgow—and many of the New Dealers recognized that life was more complex than some of their statements would suggest. Yet the liberals, in their desire to free themselves from the tyranny of precedent and in their ardor for social achievement, sometimes walked the precipice of superficiality and philistinism.

The concentration of the New Dealers on public concerns made a deep mark on the sensibility of the 1930's. Private experience seemed self-indulgent compared to the demands of public life. "Indeed the public world with us has *become* the private world, and the private world has become the public," wrote Archibald MacLeish. "We live, that is to say, in a revolutionary time in which the public life has washed in over the dikes of private existence as sea water breaks over into the fresh pools in the spring tides till everything is salt."<sup>46</sup> In the thirties, the Edna St. Vincent Millay whose candle had burned at both ends wrote the polemical *Conversation at Midnight* and the bitter "Epitaph for the Race of Man" in *Wine From These Grapes*.

The emphasis on the public world implied a specific rejection of the values of the 1920's. Roosevelt dismissed the twenties as "a decade of debauch," Tugwell scored those years as "a decade of empty progress, devoid of contribution to a genuinely better future," Morris Cooke deplored the "gilded-chariot days" of 1929, and Alben Barkley saw the twenties as a "carnival" marred by "the putrid pestilence of financial debauchery."<sup>47</sup> The depression was experienced as the punishment of a wrathful God visited on a nation that had strayed from the paths of righteous-

<sup>45</sup> Waldo Frank, "Our Guilt in Fascism," *New Republic*, CII (1940), 603-608; Murray Kempton, *Part of Our Time* (New York, 1955), p. 2; Cushing Strout, "The Twentieth-Century Enlightenment," *American Political Science Review*, XLIX (1955), 321-339; Morton White, *Social Thought in America* (New York, 1949), p. 241; *New Republic*, LXXIII (1932), 133.

<sup>46</sup> MacLeish mocked "the nineteenth-century poet, the private speaker, the whisperer to the heart, the unwordly romantic, the quaint Bohemian, the understander of women, the young man with the girl's eyes." MacLeish, *A Time to Speak*, pp. 62, 88.

<sup>47</sup> *Public Papers*, V, 179; Tugwell, *Battle for Democracy*, p. 54; Morris Cooke to Louis Howe, July 3, 1933, Cooke MSS., Box 51; *Literary Digest*, CXXII (July 4, 1936), 27.

ness.<sup>48</sup> The fire that followed the Park Avenue party in Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, like the suicide of Eveline at the end of John Dos Passos' *The Big Money*, symbolized the holocaust that brought to an end a decade of hedonism.<sup>49</sup> In an era of reconstruction, the attitudes of the twenties seemed alien, frivolous, or—the most cutting word the thirties could visit upon a man or institution—"escapist." When Morrie Ryskind and George Kaufman, authors of the popular *Of Thee I Sing*, lampooned the government again in *Let 'em Eat Cake* in the fall of 1933, the country was not amused. The New York *Post* applauded the decision of George Jean Nathan and his associates to discontinue the *American Spectator*: "Nihilism, dadaism, smartsetism—they are all gone, and this, too, is progress."<sup>50</sup> One of H. L. Mencken's biographers has noted: "Many were at pains to write him at his new home, telling him he was a sophomore, and those writing in magazines attacked him with a fury that was suspect because of its very violence."<sup>51</sup>

Commentators on the New Deal have frequently characterized it by that much-abused term "pragmatic." If one means by this that the New Dealers carefully tested the consequences of ideas, the term is clearly a misnomer. If one means that Roosevelt was exceptionally anti-ideological in his approach to politics, one may question whether he was, in fact, any more "pragmatic" in this sense than Van Buren or Polk or even "reform" Presidents like Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt. The "pragmatism" of the

<sup>48</sup> "We were all miserable sinners," announced the Harvard economist Oliver Sprague. *The New York Times*, December 10, 1933. Cf. "Special Week of Penitence and Prayer, October 2-8," *Federal Council Bulletin*, XV (September, 1932), 14-15; Milton Garber, Radio Address, 1932, Garber MSS.

<sup>49</sup> Melvin Landsberg, "A Study of the Political Development of John Dos Passos from 1912 to 1936" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1959).

<sup>50</sup> Hiram Motherwell, "Political Satire Scores on the Stage," *Today*, II (July 28, 1934), 24; *The New York Times*, November 12 1933; New York *Post*, *Press Time* (New York, 1936), pp. 317 ff.

<sup>51</sup> William Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace* (New York, 1951), p. 258. "Empty stomachs became more important than hurt sensibilities," commented one critic. "The vexations and hurt feelings of a Carol Kennecott or the spiritual frustration of an Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise*, or the frantic dash for personal freedom of a Janet Marsh seemed trifling themes when the dominant feature of the national scene was twelve million unemployed." Halford Luccock, *American Mirror* (New York, 1940), p. 36. Cf. Margaret Mitchell to Mrs. Julian Harris, April 28, 1936, Mitchell MSS.

New Deal seemed remarkable only in a decade tortured by ideology, only in contrast to the rigidity of Hoover and of the Left.

The New Deal was pragmatic mainly in its skepticism about utopias and final solutions, its openness to experimentation, and its suspicion of the dogmas of the Establishment. Since the advice of economists had so often been wrong, the New Dealers distrusted the claims of orthodox theory—"All this is perfectly terrible because it is all pure theory, when you come down to it," the President said on one occasion—and they felt free to try new approaches.<sup>52</sup> Roosevelt refused to be awed by the warnings of economists and financial experts that government interference with the "laws" of the economy was blasphemous. "We must lay hold of the fact that economic laws are not made by nature," the President stated. "They are made by human beings."<sup>53</sup> The New Dealers denied that depressions were inevitable events that had to be borne stoically, most of the stoicism to be displayed by the most impoverished, and they were willing to explore novel ways to make the social order more stable and more humane. "I am for experimenting . . . in various parts of the country, trying out schemes which are supported by reasonable people and see if they work," Hopkins told a conference of social workers. "If they do not work, the world will not come to an end."<sup>54</sup>

Hardheaded, "anti-utopian," the New Dealers nonetheless had their Heavenly City: the greenbelt town, clean, green, and white, with children playing in light, airy, spacious schools; the government project at Longview, Washington, with small houses, each of different design, colored roofs, and gardens of flowers and

<sup>52</sup> *Public Papers*, II, 269. "In the months and years following the stock market crash," Professor Galbraith has concluded, "the burden of reputable economic advice was invariably on the side of measures that would make things worse." John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash* (Boston, 1955), pp. 187-188. For a typical example, see N. S. B. Gras to Edward Costigan, July 22, 1932, Costigan MSS., V.F. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Public Papers*, I, 657. The *Boston Transcript* commented: "Two more glaring misstatements of the truth could hardly have been packed into so little space." J. Joseph Huthmacher, *Massachusetts People and Politics, 1919-1933* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 244. Cf. Eccles, *Beckoning Frontiers*, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> *Public Papers*, II, 302; V, 497; Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief*, p. 152. Cf. Clarke Chambers, "FDR, Pragmatic-Idealist," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, LII (1961), 50-55; F. S. C. Northrop, *The Meeting of East and West* (New York, 1947), p. 152; Jacob Cohen, "Schlesinger and the New Deal," *Dissent*, VIII (1961), 466-468.

vegetables; the Mormon villages of Utah that M. L. Wilson kept in his mind's eye—immaculate farmsteads on broad, rectangular streets; most of all, the Tennessee Valley, with its model town of Norris, the tall transmission towers, the white dams, the glistening wire strands, the valley where "a vision of villages and clean small factories has been growing into the minds of thoughtful men."<sup>55</sup> Scandinavia was their model abroad, not only because it summoned up images of the countryside of Denmark, the beauties of Stockholm, not only for its experience with labor relations and social insurance and currency reform, but because it represented the "middle way" of happy accommodation of public and private institutions the New Deal sought to achieve. "Why," inquired Brandeis, "should anyone want to go to Russia when one can go to Denmark?"<sup>56</sup>

Yet the New Deal added up to more than all of this—more than an experimental approach, more than the sum of its legislative achievements, more than an antiseptic utopia. It is true that there was a certain erosion of values in the thirties, as well as a narrowing of horizons, but the New Dealers inwardly recognized that what they were doing had a deeply moral significance however much they eschewed ethical pretensions. Heirs of the Enlightenment, they felt themselves part of a broadly humanistic movement to make man's life on earth more tolerable, a movement that might someday even achieve a co-operative commonwealth. Social insurance, Frances Perkins declared, was "a fundamental part of another great forward step in that liberation of humanity which began with the Renaissance."<sup>57</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt did not always have this sense as keenly as some of the men around him, but his greatness as a President lies in the remarkable degree to which he shared the vision. "The new deal business to me is very much bigger than anyone yet has expressed it," observed Senator Elbert Thomas. Roosevelt

<sup>55</sup> Tugwell, *Battle for Democracy*, p. 22. This is a vision caught, in different ways, in the paintings of Paul Sample, Charles Sheeler, Grant Wood, and Joe Jones.

<sup>56</sup> Marquis Childs, *Sweden: The Middle Way* (New Haven, 1936); David Lilienthal to George Fort Milton, July 9, 1936; Milton to F.D.R., July 8, 1936, Milton MSS., Box 20; Irving Fisher to F.D.R., September 28, 1934, Fisher MSS.; John Commons to Edward Costigan, July 25, 1932, Costigan MSS., V.F. 1; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston, 1960), p. 221.

<sup>57</sup> Frances Perkins, "Basic Idea Behind Social Security Program," *The New York Times*, January 27, 1935.



"seems to really have caught the spirit of what one of the Hebrew prophets called the desire of the nations. If he were in India today they would probably decide that he had become Mahatma—that is, one in tune with the infinite."<sup>58</sup> Both foes and friends made much of Roosevelt's skill as a political manipulator, and there is no doubt that up to a point he delighted in schemes and stratagems. As Donald Richberg later observed: "There would be times when he seemed to be a Chevalier Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*, and times in which he would seem to be the apotheosis of a prince who had absorbed and practiced all the teachings of Machiavelli." Yet essentially he was a moralist who wanted to achieve certain humane reforms and instruct the nation in the principles of government. On one occasion, he remarked: "I want to be a *preaching President*—like my cousin."<sup>59</sup> His courtiers gleefully recounted his adroitness in trading and dealing for votes, his effectiveness on the stump, his wicked skill in cutting corners to win a point. But Roosevelt's importance lay not in his talents as a campaigner or a manipulator. It lay rather in his ability to rouse the country and, more specifically, the men who served under him, by his breezy encouragement of experimentation, by his hopefulness, and—a word that would have embarrassed some of his lieutenants—by his idealism.

The New Deal left many problems unsolved and even created some perplexing new ones. It never demonstrated that it could achieve prosperity in peacetime. As late as 1941, the unemployed still numbered six million, and not until the war year of 1945 did the army of the jobless finally disappear. It enhanced the power of interest groups who claimed to speak for millions, but sometimes represented only a small minority.<sup>60</sup> It did not evolve a way to protect people who had no such spokesmen, nor an acceptable method for disciplining the interest groups. In 1946, President Truman would resort to a threat to draft railway workers into the Army to avert a strike. The New Deal achieved a more just society by recognizing groups which had been largely unrepresented—staple farmers, industrial workers, particular ethnic groups, and the new intellectual-administrative class. Yet

<sup>58</sup> Thomas to Colonel E. LeRoy Bourne, January 6, 1934, Elbert Thomas MSS.

<sup>59</sup> Donald Richberg, *My Hero* (New York, 1954), p. 279; Schlesinger, *Coming of New Deal* (Boston, 1959), p. 558.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Kariel, *The Decline of American Pluralism* (Stanford, 1961).

this was still a halfway revolution; it swelled the ranks of the bourgeoisie but left many Americans—sharecroppers, slum dwellers, most Negroes—outside of the new equilibrium.

Some of these omissions were to be promptly remedied. Subsequent Congresses extended social security, authorized slum clearance projects, and raised minimum-wage standards to keep step with the rising price level. Other shortcomings are understandable. The havoc that had been done before Roosevelt took office was so great that even the unprecedented measures of the New Deal did not suffice to repair the damage. Moreover, much was still to be learned, and it was in the Roosevelt years that the country was schooled in how to avert another major depression. Although it was war which freed the government from the taboos of a balanced budget and revealed the potentialities of spending, it is conceivable that New Deal measures would have led the country into a new cycle of prosperity even if there had been no war. Marked gains had been made before the war spending had any appreciable effect. When recovery did come, it was much more soundly based because of the adoption of the New Deal program.

Roosevelt and the New Dealers understood, perhaps better than their critics, that they had come only part of the way. Henry Wallace remarked: "We are children of the transition—we have left Egypt but we have not yet arrived at the Promised Land." Only five years separated Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933 and the adoption of the last of the New Deal measures, the Fair Labor Standards Act, in 1938. The New Dealers perceived that they had done more in those years than had been done in any comparable period in American history, but they also saw that there was much still to be done, much, too, that continued to baffle them. "I believe in the things that have been done," Mrs. Roosevelt told the American Youth Congress in February, 1939. "They helped but they did not solve the fundamental problems. . . . I never believed the Federal government could solve the whole problem. It bought us time to think." She closed not with a solution but with a challenge: "Is it going to be worth while?"<sup>61</sup>

"This generation of Americans is living in a tremendous

<sup>61</sup> Henry Wallace, *The Christian Bases of World Order* (New York, 1943), p. 17; Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, "The Future of Eleanor Roosevelt," *Harper's*, CLXXX (1939), 136.

moment of history," President Roosevelt stated in his final national address of the 1940 campaign.

"The surge of events abroad has made some few doubters among us ask: Is this the end of a story that has been told? Is the book of democracy now to be closed and placed away upon the dusty shelves of time?

"My answer is this: All we have known of the glories of democracy—its freedom, its efficiency as a mode of living, its ability to meet the aspirations of the common man—all these are merely an introduction to the greater story of a more glorious future.

"We Americans of today—all of us—we are characters in the living book of democracy.

"But we are also its author. It falls upon us now to say whether the chapters that are to come will tell a story of retreat or a story of continued advance." <sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> *Public Papers*, IX, 545.

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